CRUCIFIXION AND HOLOCAUST:
TWO POETIC CYCLES WITH
EXEGESES AND COMMENTARIES

A dissertation by

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presented to

The Faculty of the

Graduate Theological Union

in partial fulfillment of the

nequirments for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Berkeley, California

May 1978

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I decicate this work
to M.L. Giovanni Aurelio
di Ravenna, Roberto
Allegretto di Ravenna
and to the memory of
Roberto Bruno di Ravenna.
I dedicate it also to
John R. Kuehl and Maurice
Baudin, Jr.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the following people for their warm and generous support; for the sharing of their thoughts in interviews and correspondence; above all, for their questions. The community of Holocaust scholars throughout the country has been a source of invaluable warmth. I am grateful to Prof. Jane Gerber, Prof. Ruth Zerner, Prof. Irving Greenberg. Prof. Franklin Littel, Prof. A. Roy Eckardt and particularly Rabbi Bruce K. Cole, whose congregation at East End Temple in New York City was the first public audience to hear The Holocaust Season.

I am grateful to my teachers and friends at the Graduate Theological Union; to Alfred Kazin and Albert Guerard for their interest in my poetry; I am grateful beyond words for my friends in the Jewish community in the Bay Area. A special debt of thanks is owed Rabbi George Vida, and Larry Moses' class in Holocaust theology.

Another kind of debt is owed Karl and Eleanor Groszman, Paul and Bertha Bonart and Walter Selig: survivors who shared their experiences with me. Without their encouragement I might have abandoned this project. To Elie Wiesel, I owe more than I can say--for his writings and his letter to me complimenting The Holocaust Season.

Lastly, I can offer little that would be meaningful in words about my gratitude to my parents for financial support and the warm steadfastness of my friends.

Permission to quote from the following published material and, in one case, from a private interview is gratefully acknowledged:

The Viking Press for _This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen_, by Tadeusz Boroski, copyright 1967.

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Dr. Viktor E. Frankl for _Man's Search for Meaning_, published by Simon & Schuster, copyright 1959.

Ms. Eleanor Groszman for a private interview in El Cerrito, California, on September 1, 1977.

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CRUCIFIXION

INTRODUCTION:

Why Jesus After Auschwitz?

The image of Christ as Holocaust survivor is not so far removed from Christian myth as an unprepared reader might first think. The Resurrection which occurred after prolonged torture and death on the Cross and the fact that Christ had viewed his arrest, trial and subsequent agonies as somehow within the currents of sacred history are factors which indicate the possibility of a bridge between Christ's passion and the passion of six million of his Jewish descendants almost two thousand years later.

Other writers have felt the same intuitive bond between Christ and the Holocaust: in The Last of the Just Andre Schwarz-Bart has his hero, Ernie Levy, who is about to be deported to Auschwitz, speak of his bond with Christ:

> Poor Jesus, if he came back to earth and saw that the pagans had made a sword and used it against his sisters and brothers, he'd be sad, he'd grieve forever. And maybe he does see it. They say that some of the Just Men remain outside the gates of Paradise, that they don't want to forget humanity, that they too await the Messiah. Yes, maybe he sees it. Who knows? You understand, Goldeleh, he was a little old-fashioned Jew, a real Just Man, you know, no more nor less than . . . all our Just Men.[1]

And the Catholic writer, Francois Mauriac, reflects also upon Christ while introducing the memoirs of Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel. Mauriac remembers his first

meeting with Wiesel, who was interviewing the French writer for an Israel newspaper quite soon after the Holocaust:

> What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Israeli, his brother, who may have resembled him--the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine, and that the conformity between the Cross and the suffering of men was the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished?[2]

I believe along with Messrs. Mauriac and Schwarz-Bart that the key (if there can be one) to "understanding" the Holocaust may be found in the events of Gethsemane and Golgotha. The tortured sufferings of Christ on the cross were accompanied by an act of faith; if the Synoptic Gospels are to be believed, the victim of Pilate died a loving man. Similarly, the immolation of European Jewry was not the final word of that chapter of evil we call the Second World War: Israel, as M. Mauriac points out, has risen and is a living, breathing reality constructed largely by survivors of the Holocaust.

It is not the suffering alone which makes for conformity with deity--if that is what one is looking for. It is the overcoming of suffering, the negation of the effects of physical torture and social ostracism by loving affirmation of a living and creative force which can and does exist beyond reach of the crosses, cremotoria and chimneys. As a poet and student of theodicy and

tragic literature, I have chosen to plunge into the problem in the most direct way: I took on the persona of Christ in order to experience the problem directly. The horrified innocence of the Jewish civilian, crushed by pagan authorities, has become mine in the poems, and the final word of the process, the Resurrection, has made its appearance in the construction of the State of Israel by Holocaust survivors, imbued with a spirit of creative love which Christ, I believe, would have recognized and blessed.

Jesus After Auschwitz

EXILE

BIRTH

When the Roman sentry snored into his shield
and travellers without beds lay in sheaves
under the moon, you glowed in your father's arms
and laughed: his hair was tickling.
Against your back Mary rose and fell,
buoying her son like a billowing sea.
At dawn each traveller flapped back to his flock,
belching once more in the faces of mules;
yet three men left their homes to meet you,
gliding through the knife of a king's shadow.

JESUS' PARENTS FIND HIM IN THE TEMPLE

"Son, the feast is finished; every plate
is ready for forgetting. Why did you leave
us? Is one season of worship not enough
or must you ape the prophets who
were pounded into the road-
'Take him from our way! He's mad!'
Too much God isn't good for a man."

"Never the feast is over- I
am always about my Father's business.
See how the rabbis twinkle
at my questions- my Father's lightning
jumps from me into their eyes. The air
is our tallis, the walls our ark-"

"Son! Son! We preceded you
like pearls upon a necklace.
Not even Adonai stepped between:
He wings over all but belongs to
none. Leave Him for the feast-
return with us."

The sky around you
opened. Did Adonai
brush by your neck?
The very desert smiled
as you feathered
into sleep.

TO THE JEWS

Oh my people, mother
of the freedom feast:
not even Rome can wrest
Torah from your cradle.
The gates of our temple
open, eyeing the legions
like a beaten child.
They skewer you like sacrificial meat
as prophets blow melodies into your mouths.
Which will you eat?
By which will you be eaten?

TO THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS

Put down your chalice- the children's mouths
are opening like birds. Must we wait
for the Sabbath's sleep to feed them?
No law binds the sign upon my head
from springing into food. Here,
my scarabs: bouquets of grapes to cushion
every step. Brothers, do not spit
against me. Eat!

CONDEMNATION

1.

Soldier, I am just: must you wrap
yourself around me like a snake?
Where are your eyes? Can't you
see me? I am a horn through which
Yahweh blows- but we're all silent
before centurions. Father, blow
your shofar and erase these chains!

2.

Father, I nursed you; now
we drop into a hole. If
every Jew dies, who shall
piece your bones alive after
the smoke has melted?
Dismount from the stars, beloved-
see my flesh falling into the road
greasing the feet of bystanders.
Am I a number, even to you?
The sky is blank as a bruise.

A ROMAN SOLDIER

Like stones against our shields, you flung
a word or two, a psalm- number
among numbers, we'll kill
each Jew who revels in a name.
Not one cry must slip into my ears:
gods, will you shut up this man?
As they nail him I am fissuring-
hollow as a broken sword.
Where is your god who turned me
to a murderer?

RETURN

JESUS- to Zion

Let this fire where they marked me break:
I in you have waved away the smoke,
lifting off the numbers. Bearing
your Torah like a Shabbas babe,
cradle this desert as she blooms
and rises. Bread of my honor,
pillowed in sleep: lie for a moment
in my old robe's folds. Their fire
is dead. You rise.

EXEGESIS AND COMMENTARY

EXILE

Birth

The first section of the Jesus After Auschwitz cycle considers Jesus' birth, the famous discourse with elders in the temple and Jesus' parents lack of understanding, and two aspects of Jesus' ministry and career as a prophet. Since the task of the poet was to get inside Jesus' head and write from his vantage point, it is understandable that the first few poems will not seem religous in any conventional sense: Jesus could not have experienced religious feelings at the moment of birth. The purpose of the first poem was not that of the Gospels--to preach, to announce the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy--but to set the scene for what is to come.

This is done by the last two lines of the poem, Birth, which add a deliberately menacing note to this scene of quiet beauty:

> ...Three men left their homes to meet you,
> gliding through the knife of a King's shadow.[3]

These two lines describe the coming of the Magi, who, as the Book of Matthew recites, must outwit Herod, Roman King of Judea, who has been frightened by the Messianic prophecy:[4]

> And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
> you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah,
> for out of you will come a leader
> who will shepherd my people Israel.[5]

The "knife of a King's shadow," then, is Herod's evil intentions, not only for Jesus, but for all Jewish children in the area. While the gentle poetry of Luke was the most appropriate source for the actual birth scene, it is the bloodied and aggrieved eye of Matthew which is most clearly focused on what is to come. Jesus, Jew, marked member of a surplus population from birth, is spared a death in infancy, Matthew reports, not by human kindness or the force of law which should protect innocent lives, but by Joseph's receptiveness to dreams[6] and the craftiness of the Wise Men.[7] This is not a promising beginning, as Matthew points out by showing Herod's Hitlerian excess even in the face of Jesus' absence in Egypt:

> . . . in Bethlehem and its surrounding district he had all the male children killed who were two years old or under, . . . It was then that the words spoken through the prophet Jeremiah were fulfilled:
>
> > A voice was heard in Ramah
> > sobbing and loudly lamenting:
> > it was Rachel weeping for her children,
> > refusing to be comforted
> > because they were no more.[8]

The poem, Birth, then, is one of exposition and portent. The ghastly events which will permanently remove Jesus from the world are not predicted; they are seen as being made possible by the precedent of the slaughter of the children which Matthew recounts. Not only Jesus' individual biography is being recounted, but an historical cycle which in some ways parallels the history of Jesus' Jewish brethren in the twentieth century. With the precedent of wholesale slaughter of civilians established in Matthew and in Birth, the numbers are already on the arm of Christ.

Why? A poem can hardly be expected to provide an answer to the entire problem of theodicy. No, a poem or other creative work is meant to show the problem in its human context: in this case, Bethlehem. Yet, the problem at least deserves clarification. Suzanne de Dietrich in Volume 16 of The Layman's Bible Commentary describes it in the most lucid terms:

> The episode relating to King Herod shows Jesus as the object of the hostility of the powers of this world from his very birth. But the hand of God was on the infant Jesus as it was ever on the infant Moses. The purpose of God is accomplished in spite of men. God thwarts the plans of the enemy.[9]

This precise sense of the division of responsibility between deity and persons suggests that God's ultimate responsibility is not the destruction of the battle between good and evil but the insurance of the survival of a creative good. This is a hard concept to accept

when confronted with what seems--and probably must seem to mortal eyes--irrevocable horror, as in the slaughter of the children in Matthew and, of course, the slow torture and death of Jesus himself. Nevertheless, as Ms.de Dietrich suggests, another perspective is possible: that of the timeless domain of sacred history which postulates a genealogy of good continuing into Messanic time--a river in which black diamonds of evil, glittering and horrible, surface but without clogging the flow to the point where life cannot continue. This is terribly important to remember when looking at the Gospels themselves. They were written from a perspective closer to Ms.de Dietrich's than to the limited and lonely perspective of, perhaps, a mortal of today, who might regard the evils Jesus encountered as proof of the triumph of immortal evil. Some may point to Herod's slaughter of the innocents, for example, and say, "This is proof of the bankruptcy of deity." To such a person Ms.de Dietrich poses the following answer:

> Did God truly allow so many innocent children to be massacred? This question immediately poses itself to modern minds. Matthew does not raise it. He knows that the history of the People of God is all strewn with blood and tears. The prophets also recognized this . . . Once again in history, the mothers in Israel weep for their own children and refuse to be comforted. Our own time has seen massacres equally shameless. [Or more so- K.I.B.] The testimony of the evangelist is that God none the less pursues the purpose of salvation. [Emphasis mine-K.I.B.]

Ms. de Dietrich's comments provide a marvelous illumination of the theodical problem pervading the context of Jesus' birth as described in the poem Birth. The ultimate question of divine power and responsibility is seen not only in the light of ancient events but through the bloodied eye of a modern person whose image of both deity and person has been scarred by too much visible death. The ancient prophets of Israel, who assumed life at the edge of slaughter or starvation or disease to be normal, saw deity not as responsible for the alteration of what could not be altered, given the insecure and violent nature of people, but for the ultimate rescue of the whole species from the conditions of mortality and its terrible effects. God's purpose would still be enacted in moments of history; yet, the ultimate responsibility of God is to manifest Himself within the context of the good/evil dialectic and respond helpfully to persons like Jesus--in other words, to help persons cultivate goodness in the midst of suffering. It would be appropriate to close these comments on Birth with a further quote on the subject of God in history--this time from Emil Fackenheim, perhaps the foremost scholar of Jewish theology and the Holocaust:

> If God is ever present in history, this is not a presence-in-general but rather a presence to particular men in particular situations. (Like Jesus, perhaps-K.I.B.) To be sure, unless it were that of a mere tribal deity, such a presence must have universal implications. These implications, however are manifest only in the particular; and they make of the men

to whom they are manifest not universalistic philosophers who rise above their situations, but rather witnesses in, through, and because of their particularity to the nations.[11]

Jesus' Parents Find Him in the Temple

This poem, derived from Luke's straightforward account (Luke 2: 41-52), has two central themes: the initial stirrings of the religious feelings of Jesus and his parents' misunderstanding. What began as a simple journey to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover ends in a revelation of Jesus' destiny as a God-centered individual who recognizes only one Authority and whatever his external circumstances, worships only at his "Father's" altar. In addition, Jesus is further endowed with mesmeric speech, as the incident in the temple clearly shows. Clearly, twelve is too light an age for such heavy gifts and burdens.

The first few lines of my poem portray the anguish of Jesus' parents, not only because of the abruptness of their physical separation during the days of the feast, but because of their intuitive fear for their son's fate at the hands of those who could not accept his religious fervor. Joseph and Mary knew from their familiarity with the Torah the danger awaiting prophets. Love therefore compounds their anxiety:

> . . . must you ape the prophets who
> were pounded into the road-
> "Take him for our way! He's mad!"
> Too much God isnt good for a man.[12]

It is not Jesus' soul which makes him seemingly indifferent to his parents' anxieties, but his vocation, which it was his great misfortune to begin experiencing at such an early age. "Why were you looking for me?" he asks (according to Luke). "Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?"[13] This astonishing sense of religious authority is exactly what worries Jesus' parents, who are aware of its consequences: being earthly in their wisdom, they have the gift of practicality while their son, being spiritual in his wisdom, has gifts of another sort entirely. Jesus, even at twelve, is so filled with a sense of the divine that he cannot take mortally authored hierarchies--age, for example--seriously, as my interpretation of Luke's Jesus in the temple shows:

> Never the feast is over- I
> am always about my Father's business
> See how the rabbis twinkle
> at my questions- my Father's lightning
> jumps from me into their eyes. The air
> is our tallis, the walls our ark-[14]

The intention of these lines is to portray a truly innocent young man who is experiencing his real vocation for the first time with the deep sensuality early adolescense makes possible, in combination with the clarity of a mind uncorrupted by fear of adults (or possibly anything else). One cannot stress too much that Jesus's parents' somewhat negative reactions to these events are not based on egoistic possessiveness--after all, they

have been conscious of Jesus' vocation since his birth (see prophecies of Gabriel,Simeon and Anna)--but out of fear of the consequences for him out of a deep, inviolable sense of tradition: a child must live with his parents until he is an adult. Jesus accepts this--the limitations of external circumstances are not his true concern--but with a holy feeling in his heart for he knew, as Francois Mauriac says in his Life of Jesus, "Christ had all eternity in which to glorify his [family] . . ."[16] And Mary and Joseph know, this, too, and sense Jesus' submission, knowing he has not and will not betray himself. They persuade him to submit to their authority:

> Son! Son! We preceded you
> like pearls upon a necklace.
> Not even Adonai stepped between:
> He wings over all but belongs to
> none. Leave Him for the feast-
> return with us.[17]

Mauriac, in explaining Jesus' submission, implies that Jesus' attitude toward his parents prophesizes or precedes a later flowering of this attitude in his theology, a development seen in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus' mother and brothers seek him out. Jesus, upon being informed of this says, "My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice."[18] Mauriac characterizes Jesus' attitude toward his mother (and other relations?) as one of "hard independence;"[19] yet Jesus seems a gentler soul than that to me. He is a good man who is sure of the

center of his life, and moves toward that center with the inexorability of a waterfall which can only pour in the direction nature has decreed for it. This is my essential understanding of the young Christ, as the last lines of this second poem will hopefully show.

> The sky around you
> opened. Did Adonai
> brush by your neck?
> The very desert smiled
> as you feathered
> into sleep.[20]

Who can describe religion?

To the Jews

The poem To the Jews presents what might have been Jesus' feelings when confronting the most horrible and seemingly insoluble problem in Jewish history: how to maintain personal and collective integrity under the crunch of an alien state. In the Palestine of Jesus, this was the central agony of the Jewish people and particularly their political and religious leaders and factions. It has been a problem for not only the Jewish people but all people trapped in societies which are fundamentally unjust: how to act when laws compel one to kill, where the rules of economic survival command one to charge a poor person or family for bread and to sell the fruits of one's labor and gifts for mere money. Of course, the problem of the Jews of Jesus' time was even more painful: their spiritual survival was at stake when confronted with the greater force of the secular imperium; therefore, their sense of themselves as a people whose physical life is always in the hands of the God of the Exodus was constantly threatened. Into this milieu stepped Jesus. What does To the Jews say about how he addressed this problem?

The poem essentially is divided into three parts: in the first four lines, Jesus reminds the Jews of their spiritual identity, which is more central to him than

the political one, and the fact that their choice of affirming it cannot be abrogated by Rome; the next five lines describe the facts of the occupation--what it feels like to be a Jew under Rome; the last two lines are questions. Throughout the poem, it is not the Jews' situation Jesus stresses, but the response to the situation which will ensure the Jews' physical and spiritual survival until the advent of the Messianic age which perhaps some Jews of the time thought or hoped would come with the abolition of Roman rule.

The central Gospel passage which contains the philosophy Jesus brought to bear on the Jews' situation is Matthew 22: 15-22,the passage which contains the famous ". . . give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar--and to God what belongs to God."[21] These lines can be construed as a clarification of the concept of non-resistance to evil found in the Sermon on the Mount, as instructions to the Jewish people on how to apply non-resistance to the situation in which they found themselves. They can be further construed as a tool of spiritual, not political,liberation--an idea which could not have done much for Jesus' popularity among the more militant factions in Palestine that "refused to pay taxes to Caesar [and] clamored for open rebellion against the Romans."[22] Jesus had to cut a path of spiritual advocacy between what we today would call a kind of assimilation (that is, complete acceptance of

Roman rule and a secular view, and along with it renunciation of Judaism for safety's sake--a path many Jews have followed over the centuries) and mindless militance, leading to terrorism, perhaps, and to the provocation of Rome and the dispersal, probably the destruction of the Jewish people as a nation. (If Jesus foresaw this, the Holocaust, in which one third of the Jewish people were killed, would not have been an alien prophecy to him.) What, then, is the relationship of Matthew 22: 15-22 to To the Jews?

The core of the Gospel passage is, of course, ". . . give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar--and to God what belongs to God."[23] In To the Jews Jesus assures his people that they can resist Roman authority with spiritual force: "not even Rome can wrest/Torah from your cradle."[24] Just as he recognized and names the head of Caesar, symbol of the Roman heel on the denarius, in To the Jews he names and describes the heel itself:

> The gates of our temple
> open, eyeing the legions
> like a beaten child.[25]

The name of the heel is fear, then, and violence:

> They skewer you like sacrificial meat...[26]

Just as Jesus' interrogators own the denarius, they own what it symbolozies: the state, or rather the effect

of the Roman state on their hearts and lives. Jesus recognizes this because he knows about people, and with characteristic brevity and lucidity he presents his questioners with a way out of their impasse: give the imperium what it demands, for to give your life for a denarius, an empty symbol of mortal and idolatrous power, would be stupid. But give God your love and piety, for in this world only your soul is yours to give:

> They skewer you like sacrificial meat
> as prophets blow melodies into your mouths.[27]

And then he asks:

> Which will you eat?
> By which will you be eaten?[28]

In other words, Jesus had a practical eye for the effects of state violence on the bodies of his people, on all people. Yet, the Jews were his special concern, and though he could not, as he knew, rescue their bodies, he believed he had an answer for parts of them more central to "his Father's business." Numerous perceptive biblical commentators have been struck by this, among them Frank Stagg, who offers this understanding of Jesus in Matthew 22:

> The alternative to "straddling the fence" is not necessarily to fall off on one side or the other. [That is,to become a Roman or a zealot-K.I.B.] <u>It may be to demolish the fence</u> . . . (Emphasis mine-K.I.B.)

> Jesus implicitly refused to support what proved to be Israel's hopeless and devastating war with Rome, nor did he say that Rome had the right to rule the Jews. He taught the validity of human government and recognized Roman rule as a fact. In recognizing debt to Caesar and to God, Jesus was not making a complete separation between the two, making Caesar independent of God or isolating secular and sacred. "Caesar" or state has valid claims, but "Caesar" remains valid only as he is submissive to God, who alone is sovereign and who is always over Caesar. Whenever government (Caesar) seeks to be totalitarian or independent of God, then it becomes idolatrous.[29]

This contradicts the idea that Jesus' essential motivations were political--to free his captive people from the Roman yolk. Mr. Stagg interprets Jesus as accepting the Roman state as immovable, a fixed part of the set on which the tragedy of his people is being enacted. As I say in To the Jews, Jesus' main concern is that the Jews uphold their role in the dialectic with a sense of their own spiritual integrity: the people of the Book belong to Torah and its Author before they belong to Rome, and what is Rome before the Lord, who is external and whose prophets' melodies are part of a tradition stemming from creation itself?

Suzanne de Dietrich, in Volume 16 of The Laymen's Biblical Commentary, comments further on the application of non-resistance:

> We know from elsewhere what Jesus thinks of temporal authority--it is its nature to "domineer" (see 20:25). The domineering is a part of the order of this whole world which is destined to disappear. The norms of the

> Kingdom to come are exactly the opposite (20: 26-27; see 5:5). But the Kingdom cannot be established by violence; it can be established only by God himself, in his own time . . .[30]

Ms. de Dietrich is saying that Jesus desired the Jews to enter the domain of sacred history even while Rome had hold of their bodies. His ministry might even be interpreted as showing those he encountered how to do this, believing, perhaps, that each human being was responsible for hastening the coming of the Messianic age, and must learn to behave kindly and honorably, even under the worst of temporary circumstances. Let us contrast this ancient Jewish idea with a previous quote by Emil Fackenheim, which was first used in the comments on the poem, Birth:

> If God is ever-present in history, this is not a presence-in-general but rather a presence to particular men in particular situations . . . witnesses, in, through and because of their particularity to the nations.[31]

The responsibility for the coming of the Messianic kingdom, the disappearance of the murderous and unjust state, and the coming of the Golden Age is a human responsibility: this is surely the core of what has been said here by Biblical commentators, Holocaust theologian and poet alike. It is not the temporal circumstances surrounding and ordering human life, but the quality of the spiritual response which counts. Perhaps a line of historical descent implicating a less-than-adequate spiritual response on the part of the Jews to oppressive circumstances leads from

the victory of the Zealots to the Holocaust: the inevitable defeat and dispersion of the Jews led to their isolation among alien people and,finally, to near-annihilation. In the post-Holocaust age, the choices Jesus perceived as being pertinent to the Jewish situation still stand. Will the imperium gain its final victory over the minds of its subjects? Or will the prophets' melodies eventually hold sway?

To the Council of Elders

The incident portrayed in the poem is a fictional one; whether its antecedents in the Gospels are also fictional it is not possible to determine. Matthew, for example, reports on Jesus' conflicts over Halakha (Jewish law) with a group of men he calls the Pharisees. Certainly there were Pharisees in Palestine at the time Jesus lived, preached and died; whether they were factually and properly portrayed in the Gospels has been a matter of intense debate for a very long time and probably will remain so. Leo Baeck, for example, describes the Pharisees as members of

> a movement aimed at separation [Baeck cites the Hebrew word Parush meaning "separated" as the etymological root of the word "Pharisee."-K.I.B.] from the nations and at saintliness to be achieved by this means.[32]

and flatly states that

> the passages of the Gospels that refer to the Pharisees have no historical significance; in them (the word) Pharisee is not used in its historical connotation but only serves the purpose of ridicule and deprecation. They refer not to "saints" but to hypocrites, not to the pious but to the sanctimonious.[33]

For example, while Baptist scholar Frank Stagg does not appear to quarrel with the Gospel's interpretation

of the alleged conflict between Jesus and what might be termed "legalists":

> Matthew does show the basic conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, but he did not make the gulf between Jesus and the Pharisees greater than it was.[34]

At no place in his commentary does Prof. Stagg challenge the authority of the text in a basic way.

As a poet wishing to interpret Jesus' life in the most authoritative way possible, I felt trapped between the two poles of this conflict as I felt the solid earth of an important part of the Gospels' Jesus sliding out from under me. I am in no position to choose between Rabbi Baeck and Prof. Stagg, and as a Jew feel even more trapped: I wished to interpret Jesus' apparent conflicts with the more orthodox halakhic Jews of his time without siding, even advertantly, with those who have used a dogmatic interpretation of these conflicts to justify blaming all Jews for Jesus' death--an idea which eventually flowered into the horrifying reality of the Holocaust. Finding no way out of the dilemma, I chose to fictionalize an incident which would show the choices Jesus made, hoping that some Jews somewhere will understand that it is the conflict between an individual who could not comprehend the law as other than penultimate and the Pharisees, who did not believe, as Jesus did, in individual destinies but only in the collective or national one which rested on

obedience to the Law which Jesus is reported to have questioned in the Gospels[35] and in my poem, To the Council of Elders.

An incident recounted in the Gospel according to St. Matthew provides the "real" inspiration for To the Council of Elders. In Matthew 12: 1-8, Jesus' disciples are hungry and pick and eat some corn. This was "work" and therefore forbidden on the Sabbath, which is when the incident took place. Jesus and the Pharisees argue which is more important, human hunger or the Law, and Jesus quotes at them a sentence of the prophet Hosea: "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice,"[36] and in his blunt fashion declares, "If you had understood the meaning of these words, you would not have condemned the blameless;"[37] indicating his disciples. He ends his speech with the astonishing statement, "For the Son of Man is master of the Sabbath."[38]

The essential point of both To the Council of Elders and Matthew 12: 1-8 is that Jesus believed in the priority of certain claims over others:[39] mercy above sacrifice is perhaps cryptic for Jesus' hierarchy of moral claims. In my poems, he points to the hunger of children and cries out to the elders at their ritual:

> Must we wait
> for the Sabbath's sleep to feed them?[40]

Clearly, to Jesus the answer must be no, even at the risk of offending these interpreters of the Law:

No law binds the sign upon my head
from springing into food.[41]

Surely a man who could not stomach the hunger of adults could not bear the hunger of children--such is the basis of the poem's derivation. He acts:

Here,
my scarabs: bouquets of grapes to cushion
every step.[42]

The response of the defenders of the Law is, of course, negative:

Brothers, do not spit
against me.[43]

And Jesus' final reply is to command them to rejoice:

Eat![44]

What is portrayed in both To the Council of Elders and the incident from Jesus' ministry on which the poem is based is truly an impossible situation which could seemingly be resolved only by the silence or death of one of the two parties. It is perhaps the classic conflict between the creative individual and those in his or her community who see that person as somehow threatening to the welfare of the community as a whole. The Pharisees portrayed in Matthew felt, rightly or wrongly, that in their defense of the halakhic Sabbath laws they were defending the religious integrity of their people, which they did not perceive as separate from Jewish physical integrity.

If that sounds a bit like "La loi c'est moi," one should consider the precariousness of the Jewish situation up to and including that time.

Rabbi Samuel Umen casts a compassionate light on both the content and inevitability of the conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees in his excellent book, Pharasaism and Judaism. He asks the reasons for the conflict and begins to answer himself:

> Jesus' emphasis on the Kingdom of heaven and his negation of this world was viewed as a threat to the state and national Judaism. It meant the ruin of national life.[45]

It seems to me that the deepest implications of these two connected sentences are neither religious nor historical, but psychological. A group under stress survives by obedience to a collective rule or set of rules; when one person individuates himself, the whole group may feel vulnerable. Therefore, the weak spot must be cut away quickly, before the threat, however real or imagined, takes advantage of the new weakness and destroys everyone in that tortured mass. Also, perhaps Jesus' concern for the hereafter seemed to the halakhic rabbis a threat of another kind. In The Survivor, a work on survival in the concentration camps, Terence Des Pres quotes surviving inmates who knew that the price of distancing oneself from reality was death. Particularly when one is in hell and continually threatened, one can only survive by remaining constantly

aware of one's surroundings:

> . . . It was deadly to remain within the dream. Prisoners unable to shake off their sense of unreality could only drift as one drifts in dream, sleepless and stupid . . . the alternative was to wake up, to replace apathy with struggle and transcend the derangement of nightmare by recovering moral perspective.[46]

Did Jesus' concern for the hereafter give the Pharisees an unbearable sense of both his and their vulnerability? Was that "otherworldliness" the equivalent, to the halakhists, of DesPres' deadly dream, the immuring in which could lead to inattentiveness at the moment where one could escape death at a centurion's whim only by running quickly enough? It is not the sanctity of the Law but the deepest and most primitive instincts for survival which formed the basis of Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees. This is supported by another comment of Rabbi Umen's:

> . . . the Pharisees were afraid that the nation would suffer at the hands of Rome on account of (Jesus) believing himself to be the Messiah. For Rome looked upon any popular leader of the people with disfavor and great suspicion.[47]

It is not a conflict in which one can easily choose a side and weave a banner for it. In examining such an insoluble conflict, one might remind oneself that both Jesus and the Pharisees were, like kapo and common prisoner in the concentration camps, in a sense always hostages of the Romans, constantly under guard in an occupied zone.

This makes the tragedy of their conflict all the greater, all the more pitiful, since they were all avowed Jews and all therefore, in a sense, nationalists under the boot of a multi-national military empire and likely, for that reason, to die the same way. Pity and tears might be the only adequate response--a fact Jesus knew, and showed he knew, in his moments of lamentation.

Condemnation

1

The Condemnation section includes three poems; the first depicting the arrest at Gethsemane, the second Jesus' agony of the Crucifixion and the third the "conversion" of a Roman soldier who witnesses and perhaps executes Jesus' agony on the Cross.

The first poem, which is untitled and simply numbered 1, depicts a scene whose horror has been repeated many millions of times, particularly in this century. This horror is manifold: it consists of the objective scene of many armed men laying hands on one innocent and unarmed man and is compounded by the subjective agony of the solitary man deemed criminal, separated from his fellows by the mark of Cain which the state brands upon his forehead by force of law. The physical removal, isolation in prison and trial of Jesus did not have to be gone into here; all agony is either implicit or explicit in the two poems, 1 and 2, which are in Jesus' voice and, in some sense, are meant to and perhaps do speak for all innocent, tortured, despised prisoners.

The first two lines of 1 are a protest:

> Soldier, I am just: must you wrap
> yourself around me like a snake?[48]

The direct analogue to this sentence is recorded in Matthew;

> Am I a brigand, that you had to set out to capture me with swords and clubs? I sat teaching in the Temple day after day and you never laid hands on me.[49]

He is innocent, and he knows it; but the mental agony of rejection and cruel treatment will not leave him until the moment of death. It is in the constant reiteration of this truth from the passages describing the incident at Gethsemane to the end of the Book that the Gospel According to St. Matthew is a work in the literature of atrocity, for it records the human consequences of state (community) force levied against the innocent individual perceived as a threat. Each similar scene enacted from the beginning of human history through the present moment has very probably created similar subjective feelings on the part of the victim and similar objective consequences for the community in that when faced with the threat of state terrorism, almost all people will run and hide, rejecting creativity of whatever kind as too risky, politically speaking. Is this the significance of Peter's betrayal and the fleeing of the apostles after Jesus' arrest? It is the isolation of the victim which runs through this story like a bloody thread.

In my poem Jesus feels the effects of the state's reducing him to a disposable quantity when he can find no reflection of himself in the eyes of the arresting officer:

> Where are your eyes? Can't you see me?[50]

There is no moment more terrible than that in which the mirror of our fellow creatures refuses to give us back to ourselves. Anyone who wishes to understand the effects of discrimination and prejudice, social isolation, ostracism of populations, deportation and genocide should examine these two lines: the scars of these atrocities on a human soul are implied here. The fact that Jesus is a man of such extreme sensitivity, and will feel this suffering, this soul-branding as deeply as anyone can makes the incident even more horrible: as one commentator says, Jesus "[drank] to the dregs the cup of human sin."[51]

What recourse does Jesus, or anyone, have in this situation? One recalls the legend of Rabbi Leo Baeck, whose story is cited in my sequence The Holocaust Season; a singer's story: he held seminars on philosophy and literature for fellow inmates of the concentration camp Theresienstadt. The inner resources such an act must have taken weigh upon the living mind like iron. Jesus, as Rabbi Baeck must have done, and others have done since, looked into his spiritual core and found God there, although he tries one last time to slay the blindness of the centurion with his innocence:

> I am a horn through which
> Yahweh blows- but we're all silent
> before centurions. Father, blow
> your shofar and erase these chains![52]

In the process of divestiture of all human associations, Jesus still feels afloat on his vocation. Like water or light, religiousity moves through him, and it cannot be taken away from him. This is reminiscent of the experiences of certain survivors of the Holocaust and the Soviet death camps, who did not speak of religiosity as such but of a connection to life felt at the deepest core and center of their being. As Terence DesPres says of those survivors whose experiences he has read or heard, and reflected upon:

> The reference is always to something other and greater than the personal ego, a reservoir of strength and resources which in extremity becomes active and is felt as the deeper foundation of selfhood.[53]

What matters is not a word identifiable as Christian or Jewish in the mouths of Jesus or his brethren who lived through the Holocaust or any group or person with a similar history. What matters is this life which is there to be drawn upon in extremity. It was active in Jesus until his side was pierced with a spear. He called it God or Yahweh, but that is irrelevant: what is pertinent here is that he did not feel it as a force outside or completely outside himself and therefore beyond his capacities. It is this "talent for living",[54] as a survivor DesPres quotes terms it, which matters here. It exists to be drawn upon in extremity and supersedes state authority, not only in its power over people but in the length of its residence in the human spirit/body.

Jesus knew this, although he stated it more simply and much more powerfully in action, Rarely in history has such a concert of redemption been replayed.

2

This poem is a very free interpretation of Jesus' agony on the Cross as exemplified in the terrible sentence, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?"[55] It is an interpretation so severely influenced by the literature and experience of the Holocaust that in fairness even I must say that Jesus may never have felt all the emotions I have attempted to ascribe to him; the poem is a guess at what lies beneath the sentence from Matthew quoted above.

God doesn't die in this poem. Jesus does not fear or even consider the death of God; what he is afraid of is that his death in some way means a shadowing of God, and therefore (Why?) the death of the Jewish people, said death of which would remove all witnesses to God, and therefore the presence of God in human minds, from history, from collectively experienced reality. In the poem, Jesus first says:

> Father, I nursed you; now
> we drop into a hole.[55]

Perhaps what this means is that when an innocent person is slaughtered, a piece of hope dies, and if one aspect

of God is the hope of eternal life even in the presence of death, then something holy dies with the victim. This is almost too horrible to contemplate, so the next thought does not even attempt to address the subject, but proceeds to contemplate what Jesus' execution means to the Jews--God's witnesses:

> If
> every Jew dies, who shall
> piece your bones alive after
> the smoke has melted?[57]

What does the death of one Jew--Jesus--have to do with the possible elimination of all Jews? Did the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels actually foresee this as a possibility? There are prophecies recorded of the death of Jerusalem--"Your house will be left to you desolate"[58]--and a prophecy of the prelude to the coming of the Son of Man containing warnings of great violence which will halve the population of the earth.[59] Nowhere in any of these prophecies does Christ baldly state that the Jewish people will be slaughtered en masse. What I think his real understanding was, and what I have attempted to portray in my poem, is the real consequence of the reign of death: that people will lose faith in each other, and therefore be incapable of a faith going beyond what they see. Jesus, being both a religious man and possessed of an extraordinary understanding of people, exhorted people to love and care for one another so that they may know God; he knew that only in very rare persons can a relationship to God

precede knowledge of love through human relationships. Therefore, his fear for the death of God as a consequence of his own death was based on extrordinary knowledge of people. It was this love that impelled Jesus, even under torture, to beg God to intervene:

> Dismount from the stars, beloved-
> See my flesh falling into the road,
> Greasing the feet of bystanders.[60]

Does the fact that Jesus never ceased to question God amount to an abiding faith in God? Jesus' doubts continue to the end, as the Gospels clearly show and my poem reflects:

> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?[61]
> Am I a number, even to you?[62]

The Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion reflect and reveal so many emotions present at the same time that I find it impossible to be completely certain about Christ's experience or how to interpret it. I do know that his agony continued to the end; yet, I truly believe his faith did, too, and his concerns were never entirely selfish--a reasonable definition of a sinless individual.

How, then, to explain the last line of the poem:

> The sky is blank as a bruise[63]

That sky is neither bloody nor filled with angels. It is blank--an unanswered question. It is an event waiting for

a response: it is the Holocaust itself, starvation and destition, a hungry child waiting to be fed. The hole Jesus left is waiting to be filled with human responsibility as his death was caused by people, not God, and the work which would make such an innocent death a political impossibility is still waiting to be done.

Some may interpret the blank sky as a sign of the death of God in my mind. Perhaps they may be correct in that I don't believe in an interventionist deity responsible for human misdeeds, and, in fact, see the promulgation of such a concept as an escape from human responsibility for such crimes as the Crucifixion and the Holocaust. I do believe in a force for eternal life which surfaces occasionally in particular persons. Perhaps, like Christ, I am waiting for the spark to grow great and cover the world.

A Roman Soldier

The last two poems are meant to reflect the traditional hope of both Jews and Christians that the spark of love and generosity will eventually grow great in all beings. I wish to introduce this theme now instead of waiting to discuss it in the last section of the commentary, for the theme of hope informs both the concept of resurrection, and the experience of the Roman centurion whose heart sees Jesus at the Cross as an arrow pointing toward the

triumph of both Resurrection and Messianic deliverance.

In the Gospel According to St. Matthew, and in Luke and Mark as well, the centurion, along with his soldiers and the rest of the crowd, are witnesses to some extraordinary events right after Jesus'death on the Cross:

> At that, the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom; the earth quaked; the rocks were split; the tombs opened and the bodies of many holy men rose from the dead, and these, after his resurrection, came out of the tombs, entered the Holy City and appeared to a number of people. Meanwhile the centurion, together with the others guarding Jesus, had seen the earthquake and all that was taking place, and they were terrified and said, "In truth this was a son of God."[64]

In Luke, words of the same intent are attributed directly to the centurion:

> When the centurion saw what had taken place, he gave praise to God and said, "This was a great and good man."[65]

And Mark is even more direct in his recounting of the result of the centurion's experience:

> The centurion, who was standing in front of him, had seen how he died, and he said, "In truth this man was a son of God."

My poem, A Roman Soldier, is an attempt to reconstruct the centurion's experience of all this. How did he change? First he identified with the power of the imperium and its classification of subject peoples as

less than people, just as an S.S. officer would have done during the German occupation of Europe. The first four lines are meant to reflect the depth of the soldier's contempt for the seeming impotence of those he rules, and his desire to squash them (which reflects a kind of fear):

> Like stones against our shields, you flung
> a word or two, a psalm- number
> among numbers, we'll kill
> each Jew who revels in a name.[67]

The relationship of the Holocaust to these lines is so apparent it barely needs to be commented upon: the turning of human beings into numbers by the occupation of their collective dwelling place and the use of force upon their bodies was not a Nazi creation. Indeed, the various horrors of political oppression as peoples have experienced them pervade the Bible, as well as histories written by writers of other cultures during Biblical times. It is not necessary to stress this, but rather to emphasize that the link between Christ and his descendants lies in the phrase "number among numbers": the enactment of such an attitude makes--indeed has made--any atrocity possible.

It is the misfortune of the Roman centurion in Matthew and elsewhere to discover this. He learns of the effects of Roman policy on his victim by identifying with Christ's sufferings in spite of himself. If this had happened in Vietnam, would the war have ended sooner?

> Not one cry must slip into my ears:
> gods, will you shut up this man?[68]

The soldier's mental defenses are shattered when he feels something of Christ's tortures himself:

> As they nail him I am fissuring-
> hollow as a broken sword.[69]

What the anonymous centurion is finding out is that there are other kinds of force in the world, and neither his sword nor his shield--his identification with Roman power--can prevent him from being overtaken from within. It is that uncrushed spark referred to at the end of the last commentary which has flowered within him,quite without his consent. The effect of that flowering is to make him feel responsible for the effects of a policy he did not create--effects which according to the precedent set at the Nuremberg War Crimes trials, for example, he would be responsible.

Feeling this, he cannot comprehend the chain of events which put him in such an awful position. He addresses Jesus:

> Where is your God who turned me
> to a murderer?[70]

This is not only a literal question but a cry of agony, reminiscent of Jesus' own: "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?"[71] What the centurion is asking is "Now that

I feel my nakedness and believe in your existence, where are You?" It is a question only the centurion can answer, for only one person can be responsible for his soul, and that is himself. In his moment of nakedness, does he feel that? And is that what Christ would have said to him if he could? Once the centuion felt justified, morally clothed by Rome; now he is between costumes--in a state of undress. What will he become? Is it necessary to become anything other than naked to be loving and honest and compassionate--that is, to "follow Christ?" How will the centurion answer his emptiness?

JESUS- to Zion

The story of the Resurrection, in which Jesus rises from the dead so soon after the event and speaks with his apostles, and the traditional interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection in which forgiveness for all human sin is made possible, even real, by Christ overcoming torture and death by a love that grants him immortality and shines forever on all who will accept him as the Son of God, is not what I have in mind in this poem. But that does not exclude a concept of Resurrection from my concern!

Jesus' love for the people from whom he sprang and to whom he ministered and the rebirth of Israel on the original land are the two themes of this poem. It is the spirit of Jesus in some of his descendants--"I in you"--which has enabled this resurrection to take place. Quite probably if the resurrection as exemplified in the State of Israel is to continue, it will continue to rest on the love and forgiveness implied in the Jesus-like or prophetic love which is the subject of this poem.

What does this mean? Only an act of love or faith on the part of the Holocaust survivors who created Israel would have redeemed their souls from hate and torment; only this same act of love or faith could have redeemed

anything for the world at all, which, because of Holocaust and Hiroshima, Katyn and the Warsaw Ghetto is so covered with its own blood it can barely see the future, let alone face its present condition as the continued stockpiling of weapons testifies. Yet, out of the kingdom of darkness came seven hundred thousand Jews who created a garden in the desert:

> Let this fire where they marked me break:
> I in you have waved away the smoke,
> lifting off the numbers.[73]

These three lines testify to a kind of redemption. That redemption is not, as Jesus himself knew, ever accomplished in one act, but is a continuing process of "lifting off the numbers" by acts of love which will transform how people are to one another. It is here that the ethical commands of the Torah enter, for they are directives on how to love one another:

> your Torah like a Shabbas babe, Bearing
> cradle this desert as she blooms
> and rises.[74]

It is the desert of the heart, racked by violence, the stench of children's corpses and the dismemberment of dwelling places that must be cultivated according to the laws of the Torah. These laws are, according to Jesus and other prophets, the sacred instrument which will bring about the permanent kingdom of justice; therefore, Jesus'

commandment in my poem is a direct interpretation of what we have been told are his original words:

> . . . till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law until its purpose is achieved.[75]

Only an act of love has created a haven for Jews on earth; only the continuation of love will allow the haven to remain. The Jesus of this poem begs his brethren to remain in the spirit--to be faithful to the prophetic spirit of love. He reminds the Jews that the present and future must be more important to them than the past, for forgiveness of one's tormentors is the ground of love, and therefore of faith in the future--one's own and the world's:

> Bread of my honor,
> pillowed in sleep: lie for a moment
> in my old robe's folds. Their fire
> is dead. You rise.[76]

The implications for the post-Holocaust generation are vast here. The use of force in the service of revenge is not countenanced; the dimensions of the crime and the complicity of the nations are not discussed; neither is the fact the the State of Israel is continually defended by a well-trained army and the existence of defenseless civilians is at least partially contingent on what is most despicable--the continuing threat of the use of force. This is so difficult for me to accept that I

don't feel able to discuss it.

Yet, violence is not the poem's concern. In the last analysis it was not really Christ's concern. The poet's or prophet's essential interest is the spiritual response to the present moment and the implications for the future contained in that response. Hate squats on the soul and poisons the body; love opens the way to the future by an act of faith in the present. Surely, this is what Jesus is saying when he responds to the question,"Which is the greatest commandment of the Law?"[77] He responded:

> You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself . . .[78]

This is the path. In this century, both the need of the path and the hopelessness of its being followed are so apparent a prophet's heart can easily break. Yet there are pinpoints of light. A remnant of loving people survives, not only in Israel, but in communities throughout the world. Gandhi and Martin Luther King are dead, but their disciples are among us. In certain quarters the rights of the hitherto undefended--women, children, Blacks, Indians, Chicanos--are being pressed. And while it is true that these points of light seem small in comparison to the great evil surrounding them, they are tenacious in that when one dies, another is born. After the Holocaust, the State of Israel . . . Clearly the message

is that if one wishes to be a point of life, one cannot lose faith. As Jesus says at the end of the Book of Matthew:

> Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.[79]

HOLOCAUST

THE HOLOCAUST SEASON:

a singer's story

THE DEATH OF THE SCHOLA CANTORUM

My voice like sun is glowing in my throat:
every lesson's the first. The towers
like my teacher's fingers live
for a certain direction; like prayers
they shoot up to God. But now
a tank rolls past my studio window-
what is a tank doing here?
A black gangle of unmusical youths
has rammed my teacher's hands behind his head;
his back is hanging from a Star of David.
King David! when will the smoking clouds
reveal your manhood? But only a psalm
fans over us. The Schola Cantorum's
a hole in ash. Through it we crawl
to the ghetto.

DEPORTATION

The train engineer like a mad obstetrician
is flushing the baby from the mother's body:
from Germany he pulls unborn Israel.
The stinking memory of bread
emerging from our mouths floats over
the last blessing of the candle:
"Next year in Jerusalem," we sang,
bayonets in our throats.
My teacher's head is next to mine;
over his eyebrows my fingers dance.
"Courage!" they say. "Give them not
one tear but save the rest to drown them.
Vengeance, not sorrow. Vengeance!"
"The only Jewish vengeance is to live," he
whispers as we hang on the neck
of the Third Reich, albatross
of peoples.

ARRIVAL AT AUSCHWITZ

Fathers! Husbands! Why don't you speak?
Are we to die as a single candle-
nameless to you, to God?
Your eyes are the empty arks of temples.
Fathers! Brothers! Soldiers' eyes
are drinking us and no one
steps between. The womb of Israel's
melting into air as lines of heads
are moving, moving . . .

SISTERS

Women once peeking from bonnets of strawberries-
Nurses once white as stars-
Women once clouded in bridal veils-
Athletes once sleek and swift as sun:
we are to be melted into a single Eve.
What you hated in me will soon be dead:
songs I sang too much, too strongly; anger
like axes pounding on politics.
Your flittering malice is now naked.
Can I be your sister now?

TO A WOMAN

You led me past mice-covered corpses and offered
me your lap. Grass covered your ankles;
it was the season of Pesach.
Like a bonnet lay the sun behind your head.
Now there is time for solitude:
bouquets of tears are rising from my mouth
as the daily portion of corpses fades.
If I could I would die in your lap.

KADDISH

Like fishwives strolling through the local market,
guards are shopping for a feast
of children. Like birds the babes' eyes
flutter; they fold their arms
like wings against their bodies.
God! Oh faceless father. You are dead
and Israel is your altar; as we rise
toward you your foot is in the flames.
Magnified and sanctified be the dead name
of Him whose back became the sky
around our shoulders.
Father, father who suckled my song.
Now my breasts are empty.

THE REPLY OF RABBI BAECK

His hand upon my head-
His rations in my mouth-
His fingers working my work when
the scars on my palms were
opening.

LIBERATION

The gates of Auschwitz melted. You stepped
through the stomach of our enemy,
gun at waist, father and son of the new
season. I am silence, space
between bones: I'll eat
the bread you bear upon your palm
as we breathe in the gassy air of ghosts
hanging like a rag inside my mouth.
Why do we sing of the dead
as we pass through forests of silence?

BIRTH

In the heart of the fire we found a seed;
now the Negev's our bed and temple.
A child of bitter herbs and crimes is sliding
out of me: all her deaths are numbered
in her face. David witness
birthing of your Phoenix babe!
David's gun is David's Torah. Opening
the ark he found
a baby.

EXEGESIS AND COMMENTARY

The Death of the Schola Cantorum

The poem begins with my protagonist, a very young woman, at the height of her existence in pre-Holocaust civilization. She is a music student, a singer, and in the joy of her vocation is conscious only of the present moment:

> My voice like sun is glowing in my throat;
> every lesson's the first.[80]

She looks about her, radiant with joy and anticipation, as only a young artist immersed in her new vocation might feel:

> The towers
> like my teacher's fingers live
> for a certain direction; like prayers
> they shoot up to God[81]

Poised unknowingly at the edge of hell, she sings to us with a Davidic joy for the first and last time. Her words are reminiscent of King David, that other Jewish singer, whose presence will soon hover over this interpretation of the uninterpretable:

> My heart is ready, God
> -I mean to sing and play.
> Awake, my muse,
> awake, lyre and harp
> I mean to wake the dawn![83]

It is not the dawn that arrives; it is the night

and she, being (obviously) unused to violence of any kind, cannot comprehend the overrunning of the school and molestation of her teacher by Nazi hordes:

> But now
> a tank rolls past my studio window-
> what is a tank doing here?[83]

And now the horror that will be endlessly repeated--the civilian set upon by soldiers, the helpless and unarmed made into an object of derision by a mob superior in physical stength, wearing the protective garments of the barbaric tribe:

> A black gangle of unmusical youths
> has rammed my teachers hands behind his head;
> his back is hanging from a Star of David.[84]

Surely, there are precedents for this sort of thing throughout history, particularly Jewish history during Biblical times and after. What makes it so horrible here? Its historical proximity? The senselessness of its repetition in our century? The innocence of the victims who are simply making music, threatening no one? Or is it the fact that one can sense that no one is immune from this sort of treatment in the post-Holocaust age and neither age nor vocation nor civilian status is protection against the "black gangle" in any of its forms?

> King David! When will the smoking clouds
> reveal your manhood?[85]

And the immediate answer:

> But only a psalm
> fans over us.[86]

Her eye reports clearly the scope of the wasteland; it invades her vision completely:

> The Schola Cantorum's
> a hole in ash.[87] Through it we crawl
> to the ghetto.

Affliction and plea (and hope implicit in the plea) are a tradition within Jewish religious literature. One thinks most immediately of Job, but perhaps that is not the most appropriate example here. The cry for rescue in Psalm 44 (a "national lament") and the horrifying catalogue of misfortunes in Psalm 102 speaks to the Holocaust as accurately as any word written before the catastrophe. The anonymous poet of Psalm 44 speaks of God's love making possible the ancestral victories in Canaan--

> it was not by their swords they won the land,
> it was not by their arms they gained the victory:
> it was your right hand, your arm
> and the light of your face--because you loved them.[88]

--and states baldly his/her sense of abandonment and horror:

> You let us go to the slaughterhouse like sheep,
> You scatter us among the nations;
> . . . . . .
> All day long I brood on this disgrace
> my face covered in shame,
> under a shower of insult and blasphemy,
> a display of hatred and revenge.[89]

These afflictions will be familiar to any reader with even a vague knowledge of recent history, including the words "to the slaughterhouse like sheep," which have been used to malign the helpless victims of the death camps; the use of those words here is ironic, perhaps savage--but what else can pierce the veil of protection surviving populations have placed around themselves when contemplating these events? Cover this page with tears, reader, and think of the protagonist of The Holocaust Season as bard of one million dead Jewish children.[90] They cried for rescue as in Psalm 44:

> Wake up, Lord! Why are you asleep?
> Awake! Do not abandon us for good.
> Why do you hide your face,
> and forget we are wretched and exploited?
>
> For we are bowed in the dust,
> our bodies crushed to the ground.
> Rise! Come to our help!
> Redeem us for the sake of your love.[91]

But no one heard them as no one with any power to rescue, to be a modern King David, hears the protagonist of The Holocaust Season. Alongside her teacher and millions of compatriots, she is forced to crawl to the ghetto.

Deportation

How does one respond to evil while in the midst of evil? Since the end of the war numerous persons have attempted to criticize Jewish behavior during the Holocaust: "Why did they march into the night the way cattle go to the slaughterhouse?"[92] The obvious answer is, "They were forced into the night," as my poem shows. As for the question of revolt,Eliezer Berkovitz reminds us that

> There were laws operative all across German-occupied Europe. Millions of gentile people, oppressed and humiliated, exploited and massacred accepted their plight without resistance, until the required favorable conditions for a revolt rose.[93]

Given these conditions, what sort of response is possible? It is this question which is portrayed in all its attendant human agony in Deportation. Clearly, there is no real room for a physical response; once one is forced into the train, one is captive among its four walls and removed from the eyes of any and all potential rescuers:

> The train engineer like a mad obstetrician
> is flushing the baby from the mother's body:
> from Germany he pulls unborn Israel.[94]

Jewish history and the religious literature which interprets it teaches us that other responses are appropriate: one need not murder one's oppressor to remain fully human and holy when one is at the end of someone else's knife:

> The stinking memory of bread
> emerging from our mouths floats over
> the last blessing over the last candle.
> "Next year in Jerusalem" we sang,
> bayonets in out throats.[95]

This is known as "Kiddush haShem, the sanctification of the Divine Name."[96] It is the type of response Jesus demanded from his fellow Jews during the Roman occupation, as I have already discussed in my comments on Jesus After Auschwitz; it is the type of response advocated by Rabbi Johanan ben Zaccai in the face of the destruction of the Second Temple. He along with his followers believed in

> an even more fundamental liberation . . . a moral revolution [was] embodied [for them] in the Torah . . . . They were confident that before long the truth would prove mightier than the mightiest legion.[97]

Kiddush haShem is a response informed by an ultimate faith in the continuance of human life beyond the situation which threatens life. Had the death of the human race or of the entire Jewish people been a possibility or probability to Jesus or to the Talmudist ben Zaccai, would Kiddush haShem have seemed a proper response to them? In other words, was it an appropriate response to the Holocaust?

In the face of almost complete lack of physical resistance on the part of European subject populations who were better situated than the Jews, does one have the right to ask such a question? Should not all questions be hurled at those who perpetrated and abetted the atrocities? Perhaps. But the oppressed are more accessible to the mind than the evil banal magicians who turned persons into excrement, and I am more concerned with their quality than their tormentors'lack of it. In Deportation I illustrate precisely, I hope, the human beauty of the student--my protagonist--asking the question and the fragility and breathless strength of her teacher's response:

> My teacher's head is next to mine;
> over his eyebrows my fingers dance.
> "Courage!" they say. "Give then not
> one tear but save the rest to drown them.
> Vengeance, not sorrow. Vengeance!"
> "The only Jewish vengeance is to live," he
> whispers as we hang on the neck
> of the Third Reich, albatross
> of peoples.[98]

These lines are informed by facts: Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, tells us of a similar incitement to revolt and invocation of Kiddush haShem in his essay, "A Plea for the Dead." Like the young girl in my poem, young men in the transport containing Mr. Wiesel advocated open revolt at the gates of Auschwitz: they did not believe, or perhaps even understand, that the world outside Auschwitz had excluded them from its consciousness. They hoped to awaken it, or if not that, to

> prove our courage and our dignity, [to] show
> . . . that Jews know how to die like free men,
> not like hunched-up invalids.[99]

And like the teacher in my poem an older man, more familiar than they with kiddush haShem, reminds them that survival is the first Jewish commandment. My teacher bids his student to respond to evil by surviving it:

> "The only Jewish vengeance is to live,"
> he whispers . . .[100]

The old man Elie Wiesel quotes reminds his young friends not only of the world's indifference, long familiar to him--

> The world knows, no need to inform it.
> It knew before you did . . . it won't lose
> a minute thinking about our fate.[101]

--but that the duty of their remnant is to survive:

> Save your strength for later . . .
> Don't waste it.[102]

Elie Wiesel then says of himself and his condemned companions:

> Then we all held our heads up high and
> murmuring the Kaddish we marched ahead,
> almost like conquerors, toward the gates
> of death . . .[103]

What kind of religious response is this--to accept death? If survival in the midst of evil is the root of kiddush haShem, the sanctification of the name, why does neither the teacher in Deportation nor his real-life model

immortalized in "A Plea for the Dead" throw themselves on their tormentors?

There is an answer here, not in the violence of the West, whose revolts have rarely led to a renunciation of power and enslavement, but in Jewish tradition. Life, in Jewish tradition, is not equally valuable on all terms; sometimes one must leave this world in order not to pollute it with behavior that would retard the coming of the Messiah, the reign of universal justice under God. In an era of mass civilian death, this concept may be beyond the reach of all but a spiritually imaginative few. Elie Wiesel and Andre Schwarz-Bart understand this. So did Jews of earlier eras in similar situations: Rabbi Akiba, who witnessed the suppression of Judaism by the Roman imperium in A.D. 132, declared, "If our existnece is precarious when we persist in the study of Torah, how shall we survive if we abandon it?"[104]

How shall we survive? And what is survival? To Akiba or Wiesel, survival is contained in the words "religious quality." Death can indeed be preferable to living in the anarchic hell of Holocaust Europe, where one can either perish and remain just or live and be reduced to intolerable spiritual servitude. Under these conditions, kiddush haShem in the face of death becomes a response of the highest quality, allowing its practioner to remain holy and free, in the spiritual sense, of those who have taken possession of his or her body. Those mad

possessors, in the Jewish theological schema, are guilty and will someday have to answer for the blood dripping from their hands:

> . . . we hang on the neck
> of the Third Reich, albatross
> of peoples.[105]

Yes, the albatross will forever be around their necks and God will judge them in the end.

Kiddush haShem was formulated by the rabbis as a response to persecution by agents of force far greater than the Jews; these armies frequently used mass deportations and executions to destroy as much of the Jewish population as they could. These oft-repeated conditions, when combined with Jewish tradition, enabled kiddush haShem to become an instrument of Jewish integrity and religious decency during the Holocaust. Lucy S. Dawidowicz tells us what elements in the Jewish tradition gave rise to Kiddush haShem, the blessing of the Holy Name even in the teeth of death:

> The tradition teaches that the whole world depends on justice, that good is rewarded and evil punished. The universe is orderly and rational. Whatever exists and is done serves God's purpose and has meaning, though that meaning and purpose are not always revealed to men. . .
> . . . . . .
> To facilitate their survival in powerlessness and to lessen the impact of humiliation and suffering, the Jews made virtues of self-discipline, prudence, moderation, forgoing present gratification for eventual benefit. They learned to practice nonviolent means of resistance and to find ways of circumventing discrimination and deflating persecution.[106]

The question of the teacher and the response of the student make these words real. One desires with all one's heart to live even in the midst of the Holocaust, the immolation of one's flesh. But piety experienced as part of thousands of years of collective life cannot be removed from a life founded upon it and grounded in a social world that supports it as an essential element of group survival. The dilemma illustrated in Deportation and reported to us by Elie Wiesel, among others, is so awful that no response can be adequate. All questions belong to the tormentors. Could anyone but God have the right to question those who made religious or political choices under the conditions of the Holocaust?

Arrival at Auschwitz

The poem Arrival at Auschwitz begins a cycle within The Holocaust Season in which God's mark is that of the hole, of absence. My protagonist upon arriving in Auschwitz is confronted with a world of burning flesh and impotent brethren and her shock is literal and complete. In Auschwitz she is not a witness to the murder of civilization and conscience, which is, after all, in its roots deeply protective of its future as exemplified in its children; she is the death of civilization. What happens in Auschwitz happens inside her, since life and death are ultimately individual matters. As in The Death of the Schola Cantorum she cries out to once-protective human figures to rescue the mass of condemned Jewish women of which she is a part:

> Fathers! Husbands! Why don't you speak?
> Are we to die as a single candle-
> nameless to you, to God?
> Your eyes are the empty arks of temples.[107]

Silence, emptiness and the loss of religious self-hood: these are the forces tearing at her when she first lays eyes on hell. A great girder on which her civilization has rested has been knocked out of existence: the potency of men in relation to the women they are supposed to love and protect from harm. Their impotence and her

recognition of it lead to similar feelings about herself and the condemmed mass of women she accompanies: they are fragile as "a single candle" and about to be snuffed out by the winds of hell, of universal death. The sense of abandonment by her protectors, fragility, then impotence lead to a sense of non-identity: she feels cast off by civilization, thrown into the death-wind and therefore out of God's sight, nameless. This is the closed circle which, under more "normal" circumstances, probably often results in suicide: the whole world is a murderous pit from which nothing can escape. From her fellow human beings to God, nothing is potent, all is infected and this fact is confirmed in Judaism itself, whose deepest and most life-affirming symbol of the continuity of both human and divine life has been desecrated. I am speaking, of course, of the Torah:

> Your eyes are the empty arks of temples.[108]

Yet she is still alive, not quite mentally removed from herself although death is imminent. She makes another appeal:

> Fathers! Brothers! Soldiers' eyes
> are drinking us and no one
> steps between.[109]

These lines are deliberately reminiscent of the prisoners' induction into Auschwitz, when they were stripped and disinfected. Tadeusz Borowski, former Auschwitz inmate and

author of fiction based on his experiences in the camps, reported the truth as it happened:

> All of us walk around naked. The delousing is finally over . . . But all the same, all of us walk around naked: the heat is unbearable . . . . twenty-eight thousand women have been stripped naked and driven out of the barracks. Now they swarm around the large yard between the block-houses.[110]

Why go on living in a world where this is possible? My protagonist does not have time, fortunately, to ask herself this question; she is too caught up in death's infection as the majority of her female cohorts are shuttled off to the crematoria:

> The womb of Israel's melting into air as lines of heads are moving, moving . . .[111]

This sight drives everything out of her but pain. All religious sense has left her and will not awaken until later; her raw emotions are her only life at this moment. And, truly, what she sees can and never will be accurately described. Why does she not commit suicide at this moment? Is it because for the young, even in hell, all things are possible, even faith in persons, even love? It is at this point that her deepest capabilities for moral survival will begin to come into focus.

Sisters

The catalogue of hell goes on and so does the need for human contact. When the history of these events is read by future generations in a hopefully more optimistic time, they will ask why those who chose to write about the subject were not turned to ash by despair. After all, the overwhelming stink of death and the persistence in the contemporary world of those habits of mind which allow instruments of mass death to stand at ready indicate a mirror in which humankind can only see itself as demon, or Medusa. What makes life and life's generation appropriate under such circumstances?

The poem is about the moment when my protagonist becomes grounded in a life beyond culture, beyond her development as a singer and daughter of religion which was her raison d'etre before the catastrophe. It is at the end of Sisters that she accepts evil and her life in the midst of it. And again, I must emphasize that this is a "true" story: numerous survivors of the Nazi death camps have testified that they, too, sank into the black chasm of death and despair after their deportation and arrival but, given time, were able to fight their way up to the surface in which they could realistically wage a fight for their lives and quite frequently the lives of their comrades.

Terence Des Pres quotes a survivor on this subject:

> They were beaten with clubs and whips, torn by dogs, dragged around by the hair and kicked in the stomach. . . . Then, when they collapsed, they were thrown into the crematory--alive. I stood rooted to the ground, unable to move, to scream, to run away. But gradually the horror turned into revolt and this revolt shook me out of my lethargy and gave me a new incentive to live. I had to remain alive . . . It was up to me to save the life of the mothers . . .[112]

My protagonist begins her immersion in hell when the Schola Cantorum is burned to the ground. She then passes through hell's various circles until she stands in front of the fire--quite literally. That is, in both Arrival at Auschwitz and Sisters she sees masses of women hurled into the crematoria: "we are to be melted into a single Eve."[113] She has not had a life filled with the friendship of women:

> What you hated in me will soon be dead:
> songs I sang too much, too strongly; anger
> like axes pounding on politics.[114]

Yet her clarity is stronger than the pain of rejection. She sees they are all prisoners and at the moment of death have everything important in common: "Your flittering malice is now naked."[115] "Naked" in this sense means all divisions artifically imposed--cultural differences, political differences--are as ash, for they are irrelevant when the cultural milieu that engendered them no longer exists. And my young protagonist sees

this, or rather feels it, and is able to ask them: "Can I be your sister now?"[116]

This is the effect of cultural rending and the air and fact of constant death: one builds oneself from the bottom up when all else has been uprooted. But has this not been the Jewish condition since earliest times? The centuries upon centuries of forced migrations, dispersions, persecutions have made this primary adaptive trait practically a Jewish characteristic. And when religous sense itself seems to be absent, the superbly developed adaptive function remains.

There is much in the tradition of classical Judaism which nurtures that function, even when external circumstances mitigate against it. Lucy Dawidowicz, historian of the Holocaust,writes very movingly on this subject in the chapter of <u>The War Against the Jews</u> chronicling East European ghetto life before the transports removed most of the residents to the camps:

> In the ghettos death had become a ubiquitous inmate. Its ubiquity and its intimacy heightened the value of life.[117]

Ms. Dawidowicz quotes numerous sources, from folk sayings to Halakha: " 'Ye shall therefore keep My statutes and Mine ordinances which if a man do, he shall live by them.' " <u>Live</u> in this sense means to connect with others, to adapt in order to survive and perpetuate the community, without which the future would never arrive and the coming of the

Messiah, and universal deliverance, deferred forever. One chooses life in the midst of the Warsaw ghetto or Auschwitz because it is a mitzvah, a duty, a commandment, and life's salvation is social, not anarchic; therefore, in choosing life one chooses love, not as an ideal but in action. Des Pres, anthropologist of survivors, states:

> Prisoners survived through concrete acts of mutual aid and over time these many small deeds, like fibers in the shuttle of a clumsy loom, grew into a fabric of debt and care.[119]

A survivor offers this example:

> I was so weakened that during roll call I could scarcely stay on my feet. But the others pressed close on either side and supported me with the weight of their bodies.[120]

Must God be mentioned by name in order for us to be aware of His presence? " 'Every Jew who survives,' " Ms.Dawidowicz quotes the rebbe of Zelechow as saying during the Holocaust, " ' openly sanctifies God.' "[121] This is known as kiddush ha-hayim, sanctification of life: it is the unity of the biological imperatives Mr. Des Pres explores so brilliantly in The Survivor and the historical and religious patterns Ms. Dawidowicz weaves into her history of the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust. A religious tradition is not a fashion or fad of history; it is, in this case, a kiddush ha-hayim, a sanctification of life. In the case of the Holocaust it was quite probably in many, many

cases the instrument of that sanctification with its biological correlative--adaptability through social regeneration--as bottom ground. Civilized structures came after the beginnings of life and the nurturing of adaptive functions, it is true, but Judaism and the Jewish people are a special case: life and religion became one and the same quite early in Jewish history and have persisted along with the condition of extremity. How did they survive? When civilization fails,life continues:

> Your flittering malice is now naked.
> Can I be your sister now?[122]

To a Woman

> Prisoners in the concentration camps helped each other. That in itself is the significant fact. Sometimes it was help individually given . . . Sometimes it took the form of one group helping another.[123]

Why?

> Death was thereby cheated, made less than absolute . . .[124]

The poem To a Woman, like the other poems in The Holocaust Season, is based on careful readings of Holocaust history and literature, as well as interviews with survivors. The fictional incident in the particular poem is meant to show a truth not generally known among people who believe the commonly-held fallacy that"the rule of war was total"[125] in the concentration camps and inmates were totally devoid of social decency; a discernible pattern of care and cooperation amounting to "a general fabric of debt and care,"[126] no matter how faint and fragile, was there.

Terence Des Pres presents incontrovertible evidence of this pattern in The Survivor, which is probably the most careful and comprehensive analysis through interviews and analysis of survivors' testimony,of the camp prisoners' experiences to date; so does Elie Wiesel in Night, the memoir of his internment in Auschwitz and Buchenwald; of

course the experience of Leo Baeck, who lectured on philosophy and religion to his fellow prisoners in Theresienstadt, is incontrovertible evidence of moral life persisting in the black winds of hell. (Dr. Baeck's experience will be discussed later in greater depth.)

Why, I have already asked, did this pattern of kindness and cooperation assert and reassert itself in the camps? To make death less than omnipotent, I answered, with a quote from Terence Des Pres . . . how is this possible? Or rather, what made it possible? Des Pres answers with biology:

> Inmates were continually giving and sharing little items with each other, and small acts like these were enormously valuable both as morale boosters and often as real aids in the struggle for life.
> . . . . . .
> Through giving and sharing the state of potential warfare was transcended.[127]

The survival instinct is, for Des Pres, transcendent in his interpretation of concentration camp behavior; the bottom line of social behavior is a creative reordering of society in the midst of a threat so vast as to be overwhelming, as it indeed was for many prisoners:

> Here, in fact is the deepest cause of early death; the horror and irreparable hurt felt by the prisoner when he or she first encounters the spectacle of atrocity. Moral disgust, if it arouses too abruptly or becomes too intense, expresses itself in the desire to die, to have done with such a world.[128]

Yet, "survivors are proof that the desire to live returns"[129] after an appropriate amount of time can flow between the moment of supreme moral disgust and the return of the will to live. "It returns, but slowly, through an inner process of regeneration which takes time."[130]

In To a Woman my protagonist experiences an act of kindness which exemplifies the pattern of decency Des Pres reports. The kindness of an older woman precipitates that lapse of time necessary for the regeneration of the girl's survival instinct. The question of time is vital to understanding the poem: the incident of comfort takes place outside the camp's normal rhythms and activities, which are exclusively directed toward hastening the prisoners of Auschwitz into death:

> You led me past mice-covered corpses and offered
> me your lap. Grass covered your ankles;
> it was the season of Pesach.[131]

The third line of this quotation is particularly significant here in that it represents a Jewish--that is, a culturally and religiously rooted--state of mind against the girl's present reality of devoured corpses and murder. The rhythm of the Jewish year, its seasons and festivals, illuminates the dark interior of her mind, allowing her to transcend the degradation she suffers in Auschwitz. Therefore, her soul at that moment has time to heal and "an inner process of regeneration"[132] is begun which will continue: "Now there is time for solitude."[133]

Solitude, that is from the pressing horrors of Auschwitz:

> bouquets of tears are rising from my mouth
> as the daily portion of corpses fades.[134]

Given this reprieve, the soul can heal enough to let the body carry on. And though ultimate despair may never be very far away--"If I could I would die in your lap"[135]--there is a deeper need for life which is rooted in human contact and given that touch, that spark of hope passing from one fleshly soul to another, life can persist and a person can go on.

Certainly this truth is enunciated in To a Woman; and while biological needs and the body's capacity to endure may be the bottom line of the camp inmates's experiences which provide the referent for The Holocaust Season, Jewish tradition is partly responsible for Jewish survival in the camps, too. There is a unity between the need to survive and the ethical behavior advocated, actually commanded by Jewish religous teaching. The most relevant concept here is hesed, lovingkindness, which from Biblical times has been viewed as the basis of the social covenant which replied to brute force by the erection of a common life based on kinship, membership "within the circle of the family or tribe."[136] S.S. Cohon elaborates upon the meaning and significance of hesed in Judaism: a way of life:

> Hesed . . . expresses the idea of goodness, kindness, mercy or favor, growing out of the sense of brotherliness and involving mutuality of relationship. When bestowed upon a person, tribe or people, it calls for reciprocal helpfulness, born of sympathy and consideration. The covenant between Israel and God expressed itself by the some relationship of hesed between deity and the people, on the one hand, and of the people to one another.[137]

Dr. Cohon cites numerous examples of the commanding of hesed by Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah and later sages, and is always careful to pronounce the reason for its emphasis: survival of the group, without which the individual cannot survive. Were brutality and chaos allowed to prevail in the Jewish people, the group would have been demolished by its enemies at any one of a number of historical points. For the group to remain strong in the face of violent historical extremity, the members must first of all trust one another. Therefore hesed must be advocated, commanded and reinforced as a matter of practical --that is, social--necessity.

This is actually what Des Pres is saying, but he doesn't include the history of hesed in Jewish life as part of his rationale for Jewish behavior in the camps. The moral sanity, the acts of decency he recites over and over again are based ultimately in biological needs and the bank of tried-and-tested responses to extremity residing in individual inmates and groups, he says. Very well, but that biology was reinforced by religious tradition, which, over a period of thousands of years of survival in extremity,

was woven into the biological fabric of enough Jewish people so survivors could emerge from the camps and create after the war, a new social order in Palestine.

Again and again we ask how this was possible. How can one inmate of Auschwitz take, as in To a Woman, another on her lap when they are pitted against each other daily for a piece of bread? A people whose collective life has been almost completely marginal and defined by conditions of extremity for almost the entire duration of its history will perhaps be more equipped than most to recognize the pitted struggle as an illusion. Covenant is a bond forged out of the need for mutual survival amid hostile conditons: "the fear which dominated the ancient world could be overcome by an artificial extension of kinship through a covenant."[138] Perhaps the recognition of the necessity of covenant will prevail throughout the modern world as well--someday.

Cohon dwells upon the extension of covenant as part of the evolution of the Jewish religion. Perhaps the idea that the covenant must include all nations and beings came out of the Jewish people's contact with various nations, which enabled them to observe that the rule of violence was everywhere and therefore the danger to human life lies no less outside the Jewish world than within it. The surfacing of this idea--the universal need of covenant--was prominent in Isaiah who wrote or spoke the following words during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.:

> It is a light thing that thou shouldst be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.[139]

The Holocaust indicates a truth which Isaiah recognized a long time ago: there is a universal covenant among all nations, all creatures of flesh, which if unheeded endangers all life, but if recognized and cultivated in individual and social life allows life to go on in accordance with the logic of its inner promptings. We live in a time when Isaiah's message can no longer be ignored if the human species wishes to remain alive. And the Jews, who are familiar as few peoples are with survival in a state of almost constant threat, are in a good position to point this out, for moral survival in the teeth of degradation is what the Jewish religion is probably about. Halakhic law is meant to nurture the covenantal qualities of human behavior because without these qualities, cannibalism, Holocausts occur. Is this what the Holocaust, and its survivors tell us? Can we listen? Can we hear?

Kaddish

The name for the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead is Kaddish. In the camps inmates often said Kaddish for themselves;[140] is it possible some were saying it for God,also? Elie Wiesel recounts an incident he witnessed in the camps, and his soul's response to it:

> The S.S. sentenced (a young boy, servant of a member of the underground) to death, with two other prisoners who had been discovered with arms.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked.
>
> At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tripped over.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tongued. But the third rope was still moving; being so light the child was still alive. . .
>
> For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red,his eyes not yet glazed.
>
> Behind me , I heard the same man asking:
>
> "Where is God now?"
>
> And I heard a voice within me answer him:
>
> "Where is He? Here he is--He is hanging here on this gallows . . ."[141]

In Kaddish my protagonist is a witness to a similar slaughter--again of children:

> Like fishwives strolling through the local market
> guards are shopping for a feast
> of children. Like birds the babes' eyes
> flutter; they fold their arms
> like wings against their bodies.[142]

In her response I wished to represent the inner cries of religious Jews who witnessed the same scene over and over again in the Nazi death camps. These cries, a questioning of God amounting to a howl of rage at apparent abandonment, presume--what? God as ultimate agent of justice who can intervene on behalf of the victim? God as the ultimate moral restraint, without whom all is possible, even cannibalism? Let us examine my protagonist's response to the most terrible of all atrocities, the annihilation of children and therefore of the future, and see what, if anything, these words have to tell us about God in the midst of evil:

> God! Oh faceless father. You are dead
> and Israel is your altar; as we rise
> toward you your foot is in the flames.[143]

The poem doesn't presume God's withdrawal, because she is crying out to him. Yet, she calls him "faceless" and proclaims him dead. Why? What she appears to be claiming is the possibility of God's annihilation, a concept untenable in Judaism--or is it? Doesn't Isaiah feel God saying through him:

> . . . I will also give thee for a light
> unto the Gentiles, that thou may-
> est be my salvation unto the
> end of the earth.[144]

In this passage God's subjective existence--the recognition of his existence by persons--is predicated on the extension of the Covenant to the non-Jewish world. The death of that possibility is the death of hope; it is, in a sense, the death of life itself since one of the most fundamental concepts of the Jewish religion is the ideal of human progress toward an age where the Isaian prophecy of universal peace will be realized. In a young woman brought up within the classical Jewish tradition all these ideas would inform her concept of God. It is in Kaddish as in The Death of the Schola Cantorum, Deportation, Arrival at Auschwitz and Sisters that she sees the reign of God's and Judaism's negation ruling the world, or seeming to rule the world. Such is an individual's experience of life's murder in an all-embracing reign of perpetual atrocity.

Yet she cannot contemplate the annihilation of God. She would prefer to consider his withdrawal--a less horrible concept--and begins to say Kaddish (the words "Magnified" and "sanctified" actually begin the traditional Kaddish):

> Magnified and sanctified be the dead name
> of Him whose back became the sky
> around our shoulders.[145]

His name is dead because the conditions necessary for the acts commanded by Halakha to bring the Messanic kingdom into being are being perpetually turned to ash at Auschwitz, among other places; yet God exists. He has withdrawn. This may be a true perception of a principal

effect of the Holocaust, the loss of faith in a future which could contain any fate other than the next Holocaust: the universal one. It happened in the camps, as the citation from Elie Wiesel's memoir, Night, reveals. And it even has its roots in Jewish religious literature. The Psalms, for example, contain many examples of Jews crying out to a God who seems to have rejected the earthly habitat and left the species and the speaker alone. Psalm 22, supposed basis of Jesus' words at the moment of Crucifixion, is an excellent example:

> My God, my God, why have you deserted me?
> How far from saving me, the words I groan!
> I call all day, my God, but you never answer,
> all night long I call and cannot rest.[146]

The anonymous speaker does not presume the death of God, only his absence--hardly the same thing. God has simply transformed himself from a present state to an absent one, say both the psalmist and my protagonist. This makes God free of the cross and crematoria; perhaps, being free, he will return again. This is the implied hope. What was once, for my protagonist, a presence daily realized in a song (see The Death of the Schola Cantorum) has become something else, "The sky around our shoulders,"[147] a vast turned back. She accepts the new condition: God may be somewhere, but he isn't in Auschwitz:

> Father, father who suckled my song.
> Now my breasts are empty.[148]

What this poem depicts is a vast collapse of the human end of the Covenant. It is so vast that life, the evolutionary movement from one generation to the next, appears to have stopped and certainly the twentieth century has come closest to killing the future by its murder of large civilian populations. Yet, it must be remembered that while most of the victims of camps like Auschwitz were young, so were most of its survivors, as a survivor herself told me: "The young people," she said, " had more faith in life."[149] Does the murder of conditions necessary for religious belief mean the death of life itself? Or is "faith in life" not so much a matter of belief but of some deeper, perhaps inexpressible, instinct residing deep in cell and tissue and flesh? Terence Des Pres quotes Gitta Sereny, survivor of Auschwitz:

> . . . Somehow no one appears to have understood: it wasn't ruthlessness that enabled an individual to survive--it was an intangible quality . . . perhaps best described as an overriding thirst--perhaps, too, a talent for life, and a faith in life.[150]

Religion is essentially a cultural accoutrement; when culture vanishes, religion may be vestigial. Yet, other things persist in maintaining life, in allowing it to go on. Obviously, no one facing a wall of child's corpses will be meditating on this point; she (or he) will be experiencing it. But human beings can survive the death of a particular concept of God. Sometimes they have

to "let God go" in order to retain mental balance: another possibility in the face of Auschwitz, where God's withdrawal might mean his escape. He or she who feels compelled to survive can endure living without God for awhile. There are sometime less abstract things to live for which are godly, as we shall see in the next poem.

The Reply of Rabbi Baeck

Leo Baeck was a distinguished German rabbi and scholar who was incarcerated in Theresienstadt, "a transit camp leading to Auschwitz. With its humiliation, starvation and constant nearness to death [Theresienstadt] still made the pretense of not being one of the various German'death factories' . . . the inmates . . . could still think of themselves as human beings." The author of these words, Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum, suffered six weeks of internment in a Nazi concentration camp in 1935, was released and continued to perform rabbinical duties in Berlin until 1939, when he left for England. Rabbi Maybaum is perhaps in a better position than most to understand Leo Baeck, whose demeanor Rabbi Maybaum termed as one of "calm greatness"[152] upon hearing Baeck's first lecture in London after Baeck's release.

Who can explain the source of this greatness? All we know is that it was there in Theresienstadt as well as in London, because Rabbi Baeck rose to great spiritual heights in the internment camp: he lectured to secret assemblies of his fellow inmates in an empty barracks. In a matter of a few years, all intellectual Jewish life had been swept out of existence; yet Rabbi Baeck continually lit its spark in the midst of hell as if the mind

were a Menorah. The lectures undoubtedly helped free some, maybe many, of the inmates from allowing themselves to accept their degradation as congruent with their identities: Rabbi Baeck summoning the intellect from whips and chains was a bulwark against the embrace of the beast, who wished its victims to repudiate their humanity. Like Jesus, Rabbi Baeck believed that "rendering unto God" a prayer, a thought, an act of kindness outside the realm of the mad state was good for his enslaved flock. To worship God by affirming the freedom of the intellect is a recognition of a transcendent realm in much the same way praying is: to learn, to light up one's mental realm, is an act of both spiritual and political protest. And when the igniter of intellectual curiousity in the fetid Nazi prison is a fellow inmate, the best parts of each listener, each student can identify with him: if he remains above this terror by using his mind and sharing it, then perhaps I, too, can be like him.

The protagonist of The Holocaust Season has travelled through the Nazi hell and reached Rabbi Baeck (who, for the sake of fiction, I have placed in Auschwitz). What does she learn from him? It is an encounter which would be defiled by theology, for human kindness is not categorical. Kaddish shows that her mental world has been shattered; only an act transcending the world of her captors--a world pressing in on her constantly--would redeem her from inner death. Rabbi Baeck committed many

such acts:

> His hand upon my head-
> His rations in my mouth-
> His fingers working my work when
> the scars on my palms were
> opening.[153]

As the title says, this poem is his reply, his response to the loss of faith in human protection and divine presence engendered (sometimes) in my protagonist by the Holocaust, by its many deaths. Rabbi Baeck's response is one of hesed, of lovingkindness: protectiveness, affection and profound concern, all of which he manifested before and during his internment. This behavior served the highest religious function by igniting sparks of faith in life, in people, in a divine pattern discernible even when the the normal activities of love and work appear to be permanently endangered and permanently disrupted. In The Holocaust Season, the laudatory poem about Rabbi Baeck deliberately serves as a bridge between my protagonist's most horrifying experience of the death camps and the last poems of the cycle, which portray her liberation and return to the normal life process in a new Jewish kingdom.

The nature of Rabbi Baeck's response--to affirm by virtue of his example the primacy of religious and intellectual life--has its deepest root in the Jewish tradition. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, historian of the Holocaust, speaks of Baeck:

> In 1935 after the enactment of the Nuremberg laws, he composed a prayer to be read from the pulpit as part of the Kol Nidre service. The Gestapo discovered the text, arrested him, and forbade the prayer to be used.[154]

Here is a section of that prayer:

> . . . Acknowledging our trespasses, individual and communal, let us despise the slanders and calumnies directed against us and our faith. Let us declare them lies, too mean and senseless for our reckoning.
>
> God is our refuge. Let us trust Him, our source of dignity and pride. Thank the Lord and praise Him for our destiny, for the honor and persistence with which we have endured and survived persecution.[155]

It is Baeck's acknowledgement in that prayer, and perhaps more importantly in his kind and inspiring behavior before and during his imprisonment in Theresienstadt, that the domain of sacred history is accessible to every person willing to enter it and is outside the authority of the state. This is a statement of Jewish faith: in spite of temporary difficulties, as long as God is worshipped somewhere the Messiah or Messianic age will arrive. It is the ultimate faith which made Baeck a bridge people like my protagonist could cross to a renewal of faith in life. As Ignaz Maybaum says, "As a Jew Baeck has his roots outside history . . . . Rooted in the life outside history, the prophet is equipped to speak about history."[156]

Leo Baeck lived to see attempts to redeem social life from chaotic violence by virtue of tribe to city-state to national state bring that social life full circle

to the chaos where it began. He lived, in other words, to see the bankruptcy of secular messianism in which different forms of human power--call them nationalism, Marxism, democracy, what have you--not only failed to bring about the fulfillment of the reign of justice but could barely save themselves. Having acknowledged the emergence of chaos he was not only able to affirm his faith in "a trans-historic, transcendent world,"[157] but to embody that world in the Berlin ghetto, as his prayer testifies, and in Theresienstadt, as his behavior testifies.

No one knows what enables a human being to become a prophet, an embodiment of sacred history, a person to whom God is "a presence . . .in a particular situation."[158] Leo Baeck was a spiritually and emotionally mature man before the Catastrophe: his spiritual strength, emotional fortitude and moral courage were there, ready to be tapped. Surely these qualities were informed by Jewish experience and tradition. What Leo Baeck's life says in relation to the conversation in action between the individual self and cultural tradition is interestingly expressed by Lucy S. Dawidowicz:

> The responses of the Jewish community [and its members, e.g. Baeck--K,I.B.] were determined not only by the experiences of the past . . . but also by the dominant values of Jewish tradition and culture and by . . . national character and personality . . . each individual's uniqueness is modified and seasoned by national characteristics.

> Despite the recurrent cycles of disaster that marked their history, the Jews have been committed to a fundamental and abiding optimism grounded in the teachings of Judaism. . . . Whatever God does, the tradition teaches, is for the best.[160]

It is for the best because God is the primary agent of sacred history: He will,with human help, bring the Messianic age to its earthly dwelling place. The Jewish people have been chosen as His instrument, the tradition says; therefore each Jew is responsible, one no less than another,[161] for acts which will hasten the arrival of the Messiah. Personal responsibility means each Jew chooses to act in accordance with his or her abilities and convictions in order to strengthen the community and help God's work,His will for all beings.

Rabbi Baeck believed this, and saw his personal responsibility in the traditional Jewish context: he would hasten the coming of the Messianic age by acts of hesed. The exemplifying of virtue, which Maybaum reports and I depict in my poem, is hesed, lovingkindness, which traditional Judaism deems a mitzvah, a sacred duty.[162] When combined with justice, that other lordly attribute, hesed ensures the progression of the generations toward the Messianic goal, so distant yet, but visible to a Leo Baeck. Maybaum speaks of Baeck after Theresienstadt:

> It took time before Baeck found the strength to speak out and give his answers to the events through which he had passed . . . It is the message that progress, redeeming

> change, exists in history, because He exists who 'changeth the times and the seasons' (Daniel 2:21). Progress is achieved not by powers immanent in history. Progress is assured but comes 'from another place' (Esther 4:14) . . .Hope is vision and power;it transcends time and place and reaches the realm beyond the historic situation existing at the moment.

Leo Baeck was sure of this; his religous piety and love of beings enabled him to be a bridge between the tradition he embodied and a new generation, a post-Holocaust generation which somewhere, somehow had to find the courage to go on. Lucy Dawidowicz deems life, survival as"the prime Jewish value."[163] Survival is not a discrete concept: if it doesn't extend into new life it is not survival at all. Leo Baeck not only knew this; he acted upon his knowledge. He thus helped enable a new generation come into this world with seeds of hope in their breasts.

Liberation

This is a poem of calmness; it takes time for the dead to awaken. Viktor Frankl, commenting on the day of his liberation,spoke only of numbness:

> We came to meadows full of flowers. We saw and realized that they were there, but we had no feelings about them. The first spark of joy came when we saw a rooster with a tail of multicolored feathers. But it remained only a spark; we did not yet return to this world.[164]

And after numbness, hunger:

> The body has fewer inhibitions than the mind. It made good use of the new freedom from the first moment on. It began to eat ravenously, for hours and days, even half the night.[165]

Elie Wiesel reports a similar marriage of emotional numbness and unappeasable hunger:

> Our first act as free men was to throw ourselves onto the provisions. We thought only of that. Not of revenge, not of our families. Nothing but bread.[166]

In order to remain true to the survivors' experiences, I have had my protagonist observe the first moments of liberation with emotional detachment, with what Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl terms "depersonalization: everything appeared unreal"[167]:

> The gates of Auschwitz melted. You stepped
> through the stomach of our enemy,
> gun at waist, father and son of the new
> season.[168]

Although my protagonist is very close to death--

> I am silence, space
> between bones.[169]

--she is alive enough to recognize her rescuer. Who is this harbinger of freedom and new life? She cannot, she does not yet have the strength to think but can only eat, like Frankl, like Wiesel:

> I'll eat
> the bread you bear upon your palm[170]

The poem now recites its double themes: renewal of life (in the presence of the as-yet anonymous rescuer) and guilt. The latter has proven almost as much, or even as much, a mystery to people unacquainted with the Holocaust or even with Holocaust literature. Of what does this guilt consist? The protagonist of my poem speaks:

> as we breathe in the gassy air of ghosts
> hanging like a rag inside my mouth.
> Why do we sing of the dead
> as we pass through forests of silence?[171]

Why indeed? Why, after bearing so much defilement, does she (and the real survivors she represents) not simply rejoice in freedom and life? Elie Wiesel is possibly the clearest voice on this subject. He speaks

of prisoners who were spared the crematoria for the time being, but were acutely aware of the holes in the air left by gassed brethren:

> Reduced to a mere number, the man in the concentration camp at the same time lost his identity and his individual destiny. He came to realize that his presence in the camp was due solely to the fact that he was part of a forgotten and condemned collectivity. It is not written: I shall live or die, but: someone--today--will vanish or will continue to suffer; and from the point of view of the collective, it makes no difference whether that someone is I or another. Only the number, only the quota counts. Thus, the one who had been spared, above all during the selections, could not repress his first spontaneous reflex of joy. A moment, a week, or an eternity later, this joy weighted with fear and anxiety will turn into guilt. I am happy to have escaped death becomes equivalent to admitting: I am glad that someone else went in my place.[172]

I have attempted to be faithful to these emotions in the last part of Liberation, and have also attempted to imbue the poem's ending with a second truth: that the circle of hellish guilt described by Dr. Wiesel can be broken after having been passed through. In order for this to happen, a certain amount of time must go by during which a process of healing, a sort of psychological or spiritual wound-licking, must take place in order to permit freedom to be fully appreciated. This truth appears in the last two lines of Liberation:

> Why do we sing of the dead
> as we pass through forests of silence?[173]

To "sing of the dead" while "passing through forests of silence" is to grieve while beginning a new life: grief is the beginning of a new life for my protagonist and her anonymous companion though not for the world, which is silent at the sight of the survivors just as it was to their fate.[174] Her awareness will always in some way contain the "ghosts" of former inmates who did not have time to pass through the cycle of grief and guilt before they were killed by the Nazis. These are the tortured souls of whom Elie Wiesel speaks; he is perhaps one himself. The feeling that Wiesel terms "moral torture . . . a prison without exits"[175] and Terence Des Pres describes (although not in a religious context) as "horror and irreparable hurt . . . moral disgust"[176] can kill by making the prisoner indifferent to his/her environment and therefore ill-equipped to dodge a blow at the necessary time or pick up a scrap of potato peeling--in other words, ill-equipped to survive.

For some inmates and former inmates, the will to live, the need to live, returned "slowly, through an inner process of regeneration which takes time."[177] The protagonist of my poems made time during her internment--with help from other prisoners, as some of her real-life conterparts did. After her liberation, there was more time. The journey at the end of Liberation is a real one across a world of silence which is still there and in which survivors exist as oases of feeling, of sexual and

moral regeneration. Why sexual? Sex in this sense is not the discrete pleasure-seeking prevalent today; it is an arrow shot into the future from the bow of natural procreative rhythms deep in the blood of the Jewish people who are, after all, a community of survivors. After her song of the dead is finished, these rhythms must assert themselves in order for the life process, the survival process to continue. Can a biological imperative be a religious one? The creation legend of Genesis portrays God and the first parents on the edge of chaos, facing an unmapped future:

> God created man in the image of himself,
> in the image of God he created him,
> male and female he created them.
>
> God blessed them, saying to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth . . ."[178]

Birth

The Holocaust Season begins with the death of Western civilization, symbolized in the burning of the Schola Cantorum. As my protagonist is arrested, flung into the ghetto and marked by events for deportation and death, she invokes the name of David, the Warrior-King and begs his protective presence:

> King David! When will the smoking clouds reveal your manhood?[179]

No one comes:

> But only a psalm fans over us.[180]

What is there is within, and this is what my protagonist discovers as she travels from the end of childhood to the genesis of adulthood and through the Holocaust to the rebirth of Israel. It is what the surviving remnant discovered as they made new lives--as they fashioned a new kingdom out of blood and desert, out of the most searing memories and the most fragile of hopes.

In regarding *Birth*, which is a poem about the birth of Israel, there are certain things which must be continually borne in mind. First the "forests of silence" noted in the poem *Liberation* are implicit in the continuing hostility of the will of the world against Israel--

land-and-people; the creation of the State of Israel was accomplished against this larger will. Israel remains a monument to the courage which shouts against the world's indifference. Second: the surviving Jewish remnant of the Holocaust was almost one-fourth of the pre-war Jewish population of Europe: seventy-five percent of that population was gassed, shot, tortured, or starved to death during the period from 1939-1945.

It is from this soil of murder and indifference that Israel emerged. Isaiah prophesied the very events which took place in 1948. Who is to say that rebirth after the Holocaust was not fulfillment of ancient prophecy?

> The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shasow of death, upon then hath the light shined.[181]

In considering the rebirth of Israel as a religious act, one must consider the huge combination of forces against it, then and now.[182] That alone brings to mind the word "miracle"; another fact that brings that word to mind is the capacity for hope which has lived in the Jewish people throughout the long centuries of Diasporia and the six year Holocaust. What made this possible? I refer to Eliezer Berkovits' interpretation of Jewish history:

> After every destruction we were led to new unfoldings in the history of Judaism. After the first destruction, we created the synagogue . . . After the second destruction, we created the wisdom of the Talmud. In our generation . . . the destruction of Galut (exiled) Judaism . . . Having found our way back to Zion in a messianic moment, we know that God is doing "a new thing. Now, shall it spring forth" (Isaiah 43:19)[183]

The moment was assisted by Jews from the four corners of the earth and by the United Nations Resolution of 1947.[184] This financial assistance and political pressure helped when the possiblilities of viable Jewish life in Europe had been murdered. From a terrible loss of life and hope arose new hope: the establishment of a Jewish place in which the message of Torah might be enacted in a living, breathing context, not a vacuum,informed by the fear of the violence of one's neighbors.

If Israel is the instrument by which God will reveal His truth to the nations, Israel must be. The conditions necessary for Israel to be God's instrument are only possible if a Jewish context exists. Therefore, the State of Israel is inseparable from the domain of sacred history--particularly after the Holocaust, which testified to the implacable hostility of much of the world to the Jews. It has become historically self-evident that Jews could only be truly at home among other Jews: "Judaism without its chance for wholeness in fulfillment is a spiritual tragedy,"[185] This is the essential meaning of the poem Birth and the event it portrays.

A large part of Birth's imagery is sexual, telling of procreation and childbirth. The first five lines speak of sexual and spiritual unity, the procreating couple's unity with the land, with Erets Yisrael:

> In the heart of the fire we found a seed;
> now the Negev's our bed and temple.
> A child of bitter herbs and crimes is sliding
> out of me: all her deaths are numbered
> in her face.[186]

The fire, the crimes, the deaths: these are the legacy of the Holocaust. Yet, the seed is growing. This drama of life against death will never be resolved until Messianic times, until the bitter herbs are plowed under by a universal act of faith in life and life's supreme importance. When all nations realize that one can only preserve life by renouncing killing, by deposing death from its throne, will the child of Birth be safe. Until then, what does one do? One acts as witness to the supreme value of life by living:

> David witness
> birthing of your Phoenix babe![187]

Who is this David to whom my protagonist called at the moment of her arrest? Is it King David of old? A new King David? Is it a symbolic fragment of Erets Yisrael--or possibly all three? Let us begin with David of old:

> The belief in Israel's ultimate redemption was eventually to be bound up with David and his dynasty: the last redeemer, the Messiah, will be a descendant of David . . . David was chosen to save Israel from all its enemies and establish a mighty kingdom; his reign is no less a divine act of grace, an everlasting kingdom.[188]

The words "David's gun is David's Torah"[189] (line seven of Birth) express this conviction. The holy warrior who carries within him the seeds of everlasting covenant in the chosen kingdom has finally come to earth after the Holocaust, after the shattering of hope for Jewish life outside Erets Yisrael. With the gun he will defend his life and the frail lives of his wife and child--and all Israel is, in a sense, his wife, child, brother, father. The Voice of Auschwitz--"(Jews) are commanded to survive as Jews"[190]--has armed him with permission to defend his own life and that of his brethren. Since "in our time the fate of man and the fate of life are one,"[191] the age of martydom is over and kiddush haShem--sanctification of the name of God by refusing to pollute it in action, even if the refusal to behave evilly means death--is spiritually obsolete. So The Holocaust Season ends with David, a a baby and an ark:

> Opening
> the ark he found
> a baby.[192]

In the age of the Holocaust, it not holy to die. It is far holier to live.

CONCLUSIONS

The bridge binding religion to literature and literature to religion is conspicuously present in the beginnings and evolution of tragedy. But does it continue into the present moment? Critics have spoken of the death or impossibility of tragedy in a time when human dignity is lost in the enumerations of mass death. With the loss of the idea of individual dignity the idea of the tragic hero or heroine becomes dubious. Theologians speak also of the death of God, who granted the right to live to each human being in an act of creation and covenant so binding that disobedience to God's laws became, as evidenced in Jewish law based on the Decalogue, cause for punishment and social ostracism, even death.

We live in a time when both death and secularism have become the norm. Governments slaughter entire populations and go unimpeached and unpunished; they are so cynical that they don't even make a pretense of divine justification anymore. The individual, of course, is helpless before this onslaught of force on his/her body and soul: one need only look at how people numb themselves now for an indication of the extent of the helplessness many feel in a world of clashing, mechanized armies--a world where the principal of moral restraint seems to have vanished.

Whether that moral restraint has ever been present as a first principle of Western civilization is a matter for historians. I am not certain of the answer although my familiarity with the historical roots and context of the Holocaust forces me to ask the question with tears running down my face. What I am concerned with is the relationship of tragedy and theodicy in such a time as could permit, even engender, the murder of at least six million unarmed civilians.

Tragedy, for me, has always been the literature of exaltation. From the deepest pit of human experience, the highest and most permanent virtues can emerge: human beings, when tested, are not always found spiritually or morally wanting. This is what I have attempted to portray in both Jesus After Auschwitz and The Holocaust Season. In these poems, the two protagonists experience rejection, torture and, in the case of Jesus, death. Both protagonists lose sight of God, although the permanent procreative spirit I choose to call God does not lose sight of them: the resurrection of Erets Israel at both the end of Jesus After Auschwitz and The Holocaust Season is the true victory of that life-force over the fires of Auschwitz, the nails of Gethsemane.

To affirm the presence of this deity, the permanent life-force, is the answer-in-action to the problem of theodicy which Jesus gave on the Cross. It has been given by various people at various moments in history, including,

as Terence Des Pres recounts, inmates of Hitler's concentration camps. Can this be done in and through imaginative literature in a time when the moral context is so degraded that mass death is accepted as normal, when the life-affirming hero or heroine is not even seen as a relevant ideal? When faced with such a cultural context, how can a writer like myself, whose artistic and religious life centers on a quest for answers to the questions posed by tragedy and theodicy, respond?

To even begin to respond to these questions in my artistic and religious life I have had to look beyond contemporary culture. This is a sad confession, but where else can a young Jewish tragedian go in times like this, except to repositories of moral and artistic values which dignify the spiritual responses to evil of a Moses, a Jesus, a Thomas More, a Leo Baeck? I have spent my years at the Graduate Theological Union poring over the Old and New Testaments, Greek tragedy, Shakespeare--and the literature of the Holocaust. There I have found spiritual answers to the brutality of life in a culture which deifies violence: these answers have little, if anything, to do with the cultivation of will or force and everything to do with the virtuous responses possible to each individual. Whatever one is forced to render unto Caesar, one always has one small garden in which to cultivate a gift to God, to continuing life. After ascertaining this principle in my readings, I was ready to approach the Crucifixion

and Holocaust with the belief that I could make a creative artifact out of the hellish truths of those events if I would bear in mind the spiritual principle so many tragedians before me have already discovered: the task of the spiritual or religious person is to cultivate life in the midst of death, and the task of the spiritually-minded tragedian is to portray that cultivation. With this in mind, I set to work.

In order to write accurately about both the Crucifixion and the Holocaust, I went to the primary sources. In the case of the Crucifixion, of course, I had to rely on the Synoptic Gospels and some commentaries; in the case of the Holocaust, I had access to survivors' memoirs and artistic literature and, in five cases, was able to speak at length with survivors of deportation, resistance and also, in one case, incarceration in Auschwitz. I chose to write without embellishment, always staying with the simple image, believing that the event, if presented truly, would speak for itself if the human voices in my poems remained free of sentiment and ideology. The precedent for the cultivation of this artistic voice can be found throughout tragic literature--in the Old and New Testaments, in Greek tragedy, in Shakespeare's Lear on the heath--and in the memoirs of survivors, some of whom are quoted in the commentary on <u>The Holocaust Season</u> and do not need to be quoted here. They were my guideposts, these works,

and reading and studying them were invaluable preparation for writing my own literature of atrocity.

As far as religious or theological revelation is concerned, my entire theological education has led me to the point where an answer to the problem of theodicy has begun to appear to me, most certainly as a result of my explorations of tragedy and theodicy. The answer I have begun to make out is not one of abstractions but of action. One responds to evil by doing good, by enacting hesed or lovingkindness. One need not ask how God can exist in a world of evil; one need only do as God commands and push back the borders of evil by cultivating decency. This is what Leo Baeck did in Theresienstadt. If it was possible in that setting, surely it is possible to do it elsewhere.

I came to this conclusion by a careful examination of religious and social behavior in the camps--and by being observant of my own and other's behavior in daily life. I have seen enough hesed lately and felt its good effects in my life enough to enable me to believe in this answer to the problem of theodicy: one must bring God down to earth by imitating not power but love, by acting kindly even when the cultural environment denigrates such behavior as naive. Having come to this conclusion, I was prepared to portray it in tragic form in the two cycles of poetry herein with the full confidence that I was being faithful to the events I have described.

This faith in life and in hesed as the spiritually and morally healthy basis of life has an intellectual, or rather theological, side also. This aspect of my religious life came out of an appraisal of covenant in the light of the Holocaust. After all, the question of whether God violated His covenant with the Jewish people by permitting the Holocaust to happen at all is one of the major theological and theodical questions with which the post-Holocaust generation has been left. I have thought a great deal about this question and can only say that I don't believe the permanent life force I call God can be fully dominant in any event; its presence--that is, the presence of deity--occurs in dialogue. It must be invited, given a channel in which to work by acts of hesed like Leo Baeck's. Human responsibility to God is to clear the environment so we may experience God.

The terrible contemporary truth is that deity can no longer be seen if the covenant of mutual human reaponsibility is inoperative. The world we live in now is not the ancient world in which an explosion of hate in Asia can have no effect on life in the Americas, and vice versa. The Decalogue given as part of the divine-human Covenant on Mt. Sinai perhaps anticipates this situation: that is why a good part of the Decalogue lays down laws elucidating human responsibilities. The effects of the Holocaust on the remaining human

population--hopelessness, laissez faire violence of governments and individuals--serves to remind those who wish to be reminded that the alternative to acting responsibly is the world of corpses, of war, of Auschwitz: that is, a world without a future.

Never has the message implicit in the Covenant been so urgent as today. The message is that we are all responsible to one another: therein lies our responsibility to that permanent life force which survived the Holocaust, made possible Erets Yisrael and makes possible continuing efforts to bring about peace, alleviate hunger, cure disease, succor the lonely. With the presence of nuclear weapons in the hands of irresponsible governments, the message of the Covenant, of mutual responsibility must be heard. What,specifically, is that message?

The message of the Covenant, the continuing Covenant, is oddly enough, the message of tragedy: that of ultimate human worth. This worth is not a theological or a political concept, but is far more permanent than any school of thought or society. It resides in the flesh, in human life; it resides in the fact that when, as in Auschwitz, all seemed hopeless, life struggled to make a clearing for itself, even when its immediate environment was specifically designed to kill all trapped within. An immortal life principle authored the biological factors which made

the mortal life of each survivor possible. Such an authorship implies that the ultimate dependence of mortal life for its raison d'etre is not a temporary circumstance--a country, a regime--but a much more permanent one which some may call holiness or sanctification. I call it life itself.

In affirming this ultimate human worthiness one leaps the chasm of despair engendered by this century's events into a world of different possibilities. These possibilities lie in a new kind of social organization founded on an ultimate belief in the Covenant of Flesh: that life itself is its own justification and holy life must be nurtured in acts of hesed, lovingkindness. Naive, you say? Our civilization, founded on violence and a belief in human unworthiness, has gotten us to the place where the second Holocaust--the death of all in a great fire--is possible. Survival of the human species is now dependent on the recognition that we make a Covenant with each other and redesign our social life in such a way that a healthy future is assured. In the post-Holocaust age, no other answer is possible.

If the movement of mad governments to the point of the universal Holocaust is slow enough, the task of the religious person, the nurse, the good physician, the loving mother may be fulfilled. This task, the cultivation of hesed, must be performed over and over again in order for society to evolve to the point where it can refuse the violence it can no longer afford. As in the camps

it is a question of "if." Will the Covenant of mutual responsibility which is life-affirming be fulfilled in time to save the planet and its people from the second Holocaust? One never knows--one cannot know yet. One can only act with *hesed* and hope for the truth to become real.

NOTES

NOTES

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